Prosper Mérimée

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PROSPER MÉRIMÉE
*(after a lithograph of 1829)*

# Prosper Mérimée

## A Mask and a Face

*By*
*G. H. JOHNSTONE*

*La sensibilité était le vrai fond de son caractère, mais il vivait masqué.*
(*Tourgueneff*)

*C'est un fameux lapin.*
(*Delécluze*)

*Mérimée ist ein ganzer Kerl.*
(*Goethe*)

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*A L'AMIE DES LIVRES*

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# PREFACE

IT would be unsafe to hazard the statement that there are *Mériméeistes* to be found in England. The *Stendhaliens* outnumber them on the other side of the Channel, and on ours, too, without a doubt. The bold glamour of Beyle's life has a sheen on it carried over from the heyday of the Napoleonic Wars and kept bright by the constant expression of his personality. Mérimée, obsessed, as it were, with a discretion and a reserve in his attitude towards life that we of all peoples can appreciate, loses by the juxtaposition; for there will always be those who do not care to go searching for merit out of the clear highway of literature, for fear of taking for a mountain what they are told later is a hill, to say nothing of those who would sooner perish than smell even slightly of preciousness. But, if English *Mériméeists* there be, I owe them no apology for occupying myself with the study of a man and an author whose works, as they know, cannot suffer more than a temporary eclipse in the attention of those whose interest is equally divided between literature and life; I concentrate all my regrets on whatever gaps, errors or exaggerations mar the description of their idol. And if it is pointed out that, to find my subject treated authoritatively and in detail by English writers, I must go back to the late

nineteenth and earliest twentieth century and dig up the observations of Walter Pater, Mr Arthur Symons, and Mr George Saintsbury, and that there is little object in exhuming what has appealed to no one since the 90's, I can only parry with a complete incredulity ; for I have the honour to hold Mêrimée's opinion, that even in an age of the most dishevelled romanticism, like that of his youth and that of ours, when the matter is of the most various, the manner nothing, or anything, a perfect literary form cannot fail to find its admirers, if not its devotees, and that the rarer these become, the more the age is to be pitied.

My thanks are due to Mrs. Henry Head for her kindness in reading over the proofs of this book.

G. H. J., *Versailles*, 1926.

# PART I

# THE MASK

## I

To be born into the world in a quiet corner of Paris, without significant comets or perspiring statues, with, for sole portents, the cannon of Napoleon's armies dealing out death with a real and dramatic thoroughness, is surely a fitting entry for a French personality averse to useless display and a lover of vivid action for its own sake. Not that Léonor and Anna Mérimée, even if it could have entered their heads, would have dwelt on this Romantic contrast. In the house that stood in the august shade of the Panthéon, their child's sickly health demanded all his mother's attention for many months, while the father would be more often absorbed in his researches on the nature of cadmium and cobalt than in the hurrying march of events. Prosper's grandfather had been *intendant* of the Duc de Broglie, and the pavilion inhabited by him in the Château de Broglie still bears his name. But the young Léonor had quickly flown Paris-wards, spurred on by a painter's ambition and the eternal attraction of the capital; and although he kept up relations with his sister, and especially with his talented nephews, the Fresnel brothers, at the date of Prosper's birth, the 28th of September 1803, he had long ceased to lay any stress on his Norman origin, and had become, as his son always remained, essentially a Parisian. The head as we see it in a

drawing of Ingres spells order, neatness and a calm amiability; it bears the mark of the eighteenth century. The ideas in it do not clash with our expectations. After a succession of early voyages, he had arrived in Rome and settled down to paint the mythological or biblical groups become inevitable at the close of the century, when a picture was still judged by its subject, and the territory of art was narrowly circumscribed. "Vertumnus and Pomona", "Jacob leading Lia to Laban" —the painter's gifts do not rise above this inoffensive banality. We cannot seriously regret the loss of "Innocence Nourishing a Serpent" by the destruction of Prosper's house in the rue de Lille during the Commune of 1870; the "Diana restoring Hippolytus to Aricia" of the Salle de Diane in the Louvre cannot, surely, detain any passer's glances. A portrait of Talma in the Museum of the Comédie Française has more force and directness; but we are not surprised to find this pillar of tradition upholding, sooner or later, the École Polytechnique with sage counsels, and teaching its pupils never to divagate from the purest rules of classicism.

For thirty years he fulfilled the duties of secretary to the École des Beaux Arts, esteemed by all who came into contact with him, intimate with Ingres, firm in his admiration for David, drawing back in alarm before the bacchanalian richness of Géricault and Delacroix. "*La couleur*!" Ingres would cry out, shaking his square head with the rage of the apostle, "*ne m'en parlez pas; elle est bonne pour les gens ivres*". Léonor Mérimée, as man and artist, the perfect product of his time, must be counted also

among the throng who considered Rubens as "the enemy, the great corruptor".

The child Prosper, then, grows up in this atmosphere of the Rue des Beaux Arts, whither his parents have moved on Léonor Mérimée's appointment to the secretaryship, "the soft half light of a studio without colour", as M. Trahard* puts it, empty of crude affirmations, shut to novelty. It is a placid, industrious life; Mme Mérimée, an excellent mother, does not confine herself to the boy's upbringing; she, too, is something of an adept with the pencil and brush, touches off children's portraits with a hand that seems not to have forgotten how Mme Leprince de Beaumont, her ancestress, once wrote a story for a juvenile audience, *La Belle et la Bête*. In a leisure moment, she paints her own picture. The straight look, the rather coarse nose (one's mind flies instinctively to the *groin sensuel* of the mature Prosper), the narrow, strong mouth, all these signs, which are repeated in a much later study by one Picot, where she is shown in a more than 18th century bonnet with frills, must have weighed with Stendhal as he made his rapid estimate of her character. "*Beaucoup d'esprit français et une raison supérieure . . . . Comme son fils, elle me semble capable d'attendrissement une fois par an*". The stroke is firmly dealt; is it altogether a fair one? All we can know is that until the day of her death, Prosper Mérimée's constant devotion to this positivist lady remained one of the guiding factors of his life; after all, *attendrissement* is not always to be commended as a permanent condition for a parent; and who should ask it of a French *bourgeoise*? Mérimée less than anyone.

* "La Jeunesse de P. Mérimée"

But there is one circumstance that an astute observer, after a glance at these two heads so full of character, might perhaps deduce. In those four honest and intelligent eyes, the plain light of goodness dominates, taking the place of a more concentrated and spiritual glow, that which distinguishes the followers of d'Holbach from those of Loyola or François de Sales, the partisans of a kindly disposition towards a base but wide humanity from those of a righteousness militant. Prosper Mérimée was never baptized; and whatever other claims of heredity we establish or destroy, there is not the smallest doubt that the absolute unbelief which accompanied him throughout his life was transmitted to him by Léonor and Anna Mérimée, true son and daughter as they were of the Encyclopaedist days. Religion, for him, will never slough off its primary sense, that of superstition; so little of reality will it contain for him that he will never imagine the priest's robe to conceal the cloven hoof; it is but the grotesque travesty of an adroit intriguer, and he has no desire to tear it, but merely to point at it the finger of mockery.

At the age of eight, armed with a rare proficiency in the English language learned parallel with his native tongue, dressed with an English smartness, and writing the elongated English hand just becoming fashionable at the epoch, he is sent to the Lycée Napoléon (now the Collège Henri IV). School life, cruellest of man's seven ages, does not spare him the penalty for these idiosyncrasies; his Fresnel cousins and their cronies are not slow to prove to him by their acid remarks how imprudent it is to stand

out of the contemporary ruck. His studies give satisfaction; he displays no special brilliance. The little boy with the wide, half-timid, half-scornful eyes and the fine fair curls that we see in a copy of Mme Mérimée's sketch of 1808, "has plenty of ambition", as she writes to her brother; but he must "hack away at it in the holidays, so as to be first sometimes" and to pass into the Lycée Charlemagne. Then she adds: "He is all maliciousness and sarcasm, fit to spank—(*il est mauvais et gouailleur à taper*) his health is not too bad, but he's as thin as a rabbit". The description comes early indeed; it could have waited twenty years, and been no less truthful. As the boy grows into adolescence, the father decides rapidly that he shall go to the Bar; he notes in the meantime with pleasure that his son "has always had the mania for making rough sketches from real life", while moderating his wishes to that of seeing Prosper "acquire by practice enough technique to amuse himself". In 1821 he goes further; in a letter to his painter friend, Fabre, he says: "He has such a disposition for painting that, without ever having done any copying, he makes sketches like those of our young pupils—and he doesn't know how to draw an eye!" But he is none the less for making a lawyer of him, and the young Mérimée falls in with the paternal project without much ado, and gives himself over to the study of the law.

But how much other and more thrilling research does he not cram into these early Restoration days! To dash off lifelike sketches and thumb-nail portraits is but a tenth part of his activity. He has laid the foundation of a knowledge of Latin and Greek that

will ripen into an astounding erudition; if he has small mathematics and less history, his philology is nothing short of masterly. And, more, he grasps his full share of the new ambrosia and nectar—for others the intoxication, he appreciates the pure nourishment. Under the ponderous, gouty direction of the fat Louis XVIII and the rigid Ultras, with their tight rein on the Press and the electorate, France, behind the superficial calm, is seething with the volcanic splendours of a new literature. Forgotten are the days of the Cossacks' camp in the Tuileries, of horse-flesh sold to the shivering queues, the rush of the schoolboys to the defence of the ramparts; the final exhilaration of the Hundred Days has long been stifled by the spectacle of the unctuous and again all-powerful priests in the corridors of the Lycée Charlemagne, and the enforced muttering of prayers destined, so the pupils are informed, to advance their studies. But it is with an absent ear that Mérimée, and his friends, Jean-Jacques Ampère, the son of the scientist, Jussieu, and Charles Lenormant hear defined and commended the virtuous charm of Gresset and Esménard, Volney and Delille; more than one eye is surreptitiously lowered to the copy of *Atala* or *Paul et Virginie* lying on the knees, and they are only raised if the lecture should happen to concern a passage of Tacitus which recalls the thunderous greatnesses that accompanied their own entry into this by now so orderly world. Mérimée, it is true, leaves to the fiery Ampère—always "excitable, even violent, full of decision in everything"—the brunt of their natural enthusiasm. Both are devoured with a perpetual curiosity; but Prosper's instinctive

wariness, to say nothing of the cloistral, orderly life in the Rue des Beaux Arts, fixes his bent towards the pure acquisition of knowledge. None the less, he shares with Ampère the delight of unearthing the long-buried treasures of Cervantes, Lope de Vega, Calderon, and—more revolutionary still—of Shakespeare. The rest he engulfs, quite independently, with an amazing tenacity; the most remote mysteries of the Spanish and English tongues, theology and numismatics, epigraphy and architecture, the celestial art of cooking, the French 18th century, even for six whole weeks magic. *Habe nun, ach, Philosophie* . . . but Merimée, true Frenchman, always keeps that delightful faculty of possessing a *tête bien pleine* that is none the less a *tête bien faite*. Not that in the latter years the erudition does not, like an unperceived ivy, begin to throttle the tree of his inspiration; but even when the brilliant sap is dried up the branches will never cease to preserve their gracious outlines. To have an encumbered, obfuscated mind is not in his power.

Nevertheless, when this exceptional young man, imbued with the anglomania of a home where Hazlitt was a guest, equipped with that well-stuffed head and a certain ironical dryness that is particularly his own and, at the same time, excessively Parisian, makes his bow to the Paris of society and letters, what face, in reality, does he present? It is not easy to pierce this elegant armour. In 1825 when the Bourbons have ensconced themselves with apparent firmness, and the opposition has no less crystallised, it seems that all the stifled dreams of this generation thrust into a world shaken by

cataclysms are at last pressing tumultuously to the surface. Musset, in accents of sombre disillusion, has told in his singing prose of this strange interlude between Waterloo and the next upheaval. Only to glance at Mérimée we can guess that those small, bright eyes, those resolute lips and jaw, and that nose which points, like a crude signboard, towards the satisfaction of as many senses as possible, will never turn to a mask withered by the *mal du siècle*. But the great weariness was there; Musset guides us sighingly through its every phase. "The king of France was on his throne, casting his eyes around in search for a bee among the tapestries. To those who held out their hat he doled out money; others would show him a crucifix, and he would kiss it. . . . When the youth spoke of glory, the answer came 'Enter the priesthood'; when they talked of ambition, 'Enter the priesthood'; of hope, love, force, and life, 'Enter the priesthood' . . . Behind them a past irrevocably destroyed . . . before them, dawn over an immense horizon, the first gleams of the future; and between these two worlds . . . something vague and floating, a sea of breakers and shipwrecks, crossed from time to time by a far white sail or a vessel puffing a heavy smoke; our century, in a word. . . ."

And the presiding figure is that of "the twilight angel, whom they found sitting wrapped in the cloak of selfishness, and shivering for the deathly cold." The peasants and the people, even if they see with no mistaken eye the restoring of the old idols, king and priest and *ci-devant*, content themselves with rattling "the dented and rusty swords that lie in a corner of their cottages." But "a feeling of

inexpressible unrest began to seethe in the young men's hearts . . . all these gladiators rubbed with oil perceived that in their hearts' depths lay an intolerable weariness. The richest became debauchees; those of moderate means adopted a profession, and took up resignedly the lawyer's robe or the sword; the poorest launched themselves into an enthusiasm devoid of warmth, sounding words, the horrible sea of aimless action." Tussles with the guards on the steps of the Chamber, to go and gaze at Talma in a wig that makes him resemble Caesar, these are their desultory occupations; but not one on returning home does not "feel bitterly the emptiness of existence, and the vanity of idle hands." "English ideas had combined with religious zeal to drive cheerfulness away . . . in the salons, the men dressed in black, the women draped in white, scanned each other from opposite sides of the room. . . ." The students and artists "had flung themselves into the pursuit of women and wine; love was treated like glory and piety, an outworn illusion. . . . Like the Asiatic pest scattered by the exhalations of the Ganges, awful *Despair* stalked over the earth. . . . The young men left school with a serene brow, fresh and ruddy cheeks, and on their lips, blasphemies. . . ." And he outlines with precision the two forces of the Romantic Movement: on the one hand "the uplifted and suffering spirits, all the expansive souls who have need of the Infinite, with their heads bowed in tears, wrapped in a mist of sickly dreams": on the other, "the materialists standing upright and inflexible among their concrete pleasures, with little thought save that of counting the money in their pockets,"

while distant, but drawing ever nearer are heard the voices of the age's two melancholy Titans, Faust calling over the abyss to Manfred.

Mérimée, taking his easy way through the salon of La Pasta or the gatherings at the house of Mme Ancelot, somehow noticed none of these funereal manifestations, would, indeed, have considered deplorable any attempt to stigmatize in such absurdly poetic terms a life whose compensations were numerous. No one of the Mérimée household had ever imagined the world to represent anything else but a superior ant-heap; but what diversion their struggles cause, and what pleasure lies in the spectacle of brutality and persecution, the survival of the most energetic ants, and the fine frenzy of the more ingenious among them pressing their way to the forefront! As for *Faust*, a new friend, Albert Stapfer, has just completed an excellent translation of it; Mérimée and Ampère are welcomed at his father's house, where the learned old Swiss minister wanders distractedly through the rooms throbbing with animated discussions. For why not discuss? Whatever novelties are humming through the air, the Sylphides and Peris cannot fail to be interesting under the magnifying glass; their beauties and absurdities must be made accessible to reason. The pursuit of the legal butterfly has long since vanished from his intentions. Instead, he strays through the drawing-rooms, tasting, for example, the joy of having a sly dig at Châteaubriand, whom he pronounces to be "intolerable", pontificating as he loves to be seen doing at L'Abbaye-des-Bois, the retreat of Mme Récamier. Her, too, he finds difficult to contemplate with the usual admiration;

has she not, in her elderly fatuity, allowed Ampère to throw his heart at her feet and to become supremely ridiculous? She, it is true, has not been slow to distinguish this young lion's gifts, sees him as an ideal recruit for diplomacy, busies herself with securing him a secretaryship in London. But the intelligent eel slips through her fingers; whether the career smiles on him or not, he cannot seriously pay attention to a woman who is continually occupied in buttonholing her guests, taking each one aside, and talking raptly to him as if he and he alone were the bright genius of the hour! And, then, Mérimée has neither ear nor sense for poetry, and hates to see Delphine Gay stand up in her too virginal muslin and declaim her indifferent verses. No; more satisfying are the meetings at Gérard's studio with Thiers, for whom he will always have a "weakness", or to go every Friday with Sainte-Beuve to the library of Viollet-le-Duc's father, and hear Victor Cousin hold forth on a point of philosophy, or Duvergier de Hauranne passionately upholding the romantic banner against the steady onslaughts of the son of the house, whose *Nouvel Art Poétique* has had its hour of notoriety.

But there is another field where the future author of the *Chronique de Charles IX* has ample encouragement to prove his consciousness that, with however discreet a step, he is advancing side by side with the leaders of the literary Revolution. The "Sundays" of Delécluze owe to the tempestuous *cabotinage* of Victor Hugo their overshadowing by the sessions of the "Globe" and the "Muse Française"; but they constituted as much the forcing-house of the early

Romantic blooms as the days of the play-readings in the rue Notre Dame des Champs that of the tardier and more flamboyant display of the '30's. Member of the monarchist "Journal des Débats" staff since 1809, Delécluze, after some early travels and a survey of the world with a candid eye and a mind not empty of misgivings, finds himself, partly by the marriage of his sister to Viollet-le-Duc, and partly by his own naïve curiosity, immersed in the troublous sea of literary disputes. In his bachelor room on the fourth floor of his brother-in-law's house in the *rue Charabais*, not a Sunday but sees some dyke of the worn shores of classicism battered down by a relentless wave. He, himself, the plain little host ("he is like the good Vicar of Wakefield", Beyle remarks), dares not espouse the new cause, and resists with all the heaviness of his middle-class traditions. Mérimée likes him, listens with an ear always open for the living trait, the blood-thirsty moment, to his reminiscences of the days of the guillotine; but his fresh zeal is all for the battle. Over the hesitating fire, through the thick tobacco smoke (for there is no feminine voice to protest), a hundred and one shafts and sallies fly; the classic targets are riddled. Ampère and Stapfer will be seated on a divan in the corner, volleying the names of English books and their writers; Mérimée, who has it by heart, will begin to recite and comment on *Don Juan* with a marvellous perspicacity, or to remind them of Scott's manner of proceeding in the story of *Quentin Durward*; next to them listens the historian Vitet, one of the pioneers of the historical writings they all approve of, already thinking out his *Etats de Blois*; Charles de Rémusat has

brought the half-finished dramatic scenes of *L'Insurrection de San Dominque*, another fruit of the new theories. On the edge of a bureau Paul-Louis Courier is correcting a pamphlet, while his agile mind is half-consciously revolving the preface of his translation of Herodotus, wherein he will dare to throw mud at the jargon of the Academy and the style of 17th century tragedy, and substitute "a language of ideas for a language of phrases". Bertin, the editor of the "Débats", looks in for a moment; an oddly-assorted couple, the gloomy little Cavé and a rubicund ex-cavalry officer named Dittmer are talking over their projected *Soirées de Neuilly*, unaware that their collaboration seems an anomaly; Mérimée's school-friend, Adrien de Jussieu, looks on absorbed in this unceasing chatter, while the sarcastic dandy, de Mareste, flicks invisible dust from his waistcoat. And then, suddenly, the host's anxious eyes will grow a shade more anxious and the noise will die down for a second, while from a smoke-obscured recess will be raised a loud voice in some preposterous suggestion, or the boldest of paradoxes, a voice which has since put to silence even those of the gathering who were not irremediably destined to oblivion. All listen, and there follows a puzzled silence, or a burst of appreciative laughter, and in any case the discussion is renewed with a greater fury; for they may well think M. de Stendhal a trifle absurd (his forty years and his military manners are not agents in his favour among this confident youth); his worst extravagances give a jog to the ideas of the company, and then, his manifestos have

an authority of which they may well take advantage; a battering-ram has its uses.

The story of the friendship between the twenty-one year old Mérimée and the provocative "Milanese", "*le plus léger des housards romantiques*" as Sainte-Beuve calls him, is one of the most piquant things in all French literature. It resembles nothing so much as a desultory flirtation, behind which each party conceals a perfectly clear-cut opinion of his *vis-à-vis*. Before the aggressive statements of Beyle, Mérimée, who has a horror of exaggerations, puts in his horns, or sits there laughing behind his hand at the ready-made harangues. But, when Beyle declares the alexandrine to have become a "cloak for stupidity", lauds Shakespeare to the skies, and casts a contemptuous look at the portrait of Racine over the mantelpiece of Delécluze, Mérimée goes quietly away, and in the intervals of calling on "Ancilla", a bluestocking playwright of the time, Mme Ancelot, or the whip-tongued Miss Clarke, finds leisure to compose a prose tragedy, *Cromwell* (his first work, lost to us, nor need we regret it), exactly built up with a succession of dramatic panels such as Beyle had been vociferously demanding from the *cénâcle*. He reads it aloud to the Sunday audience one afternoon of 1824, but, as we might have expected, in a manner only he could have invented (and for that time of roaring declaimers, it might indeed seem an invention). Delécluze hears it with amazement, while the listeners observe his "prominent features, his furtive but penetrating look, his economy of gesture, and the irony playing over his face", and Beyle must be deciding to revise his verdict on the "poor young

man, in a long grey coat, with a snub nose, ill-tempered eyes, and shameless and unpleasing expression" of their first encounter in 1821. Mérimée reads on and on in a guttural voice that causes a certain uneasiness, "without raising or lowering his tone, even at the most passionate junctures". Beyle breaks out, at the close, in enthusiastic commendation; the seed of his own truculent doctrine has not fallen on stony ground. The three unities lie prone and stricken; the almost too rapid changes of scene, the jostling of tragic by comic, an action of infinite complexity—all is there; another flag can be planted on yet another stormed bastion. And yet, only a year or two later, he is noting; "*Je trouve la sensation de sec dans la plupart des ouvrages de M. Gazul* (Mérimée); *mais j'escompte sur l'avenir*", while Mérimée writes frankly to him: "*Il y a dans le caractère de Julien* (*Sorel*) *des traits atroces dont tout le monde sent la vérité, mais qui font horreur; le but de l'art n'est pas de montrer ce côté de la nature humaine.*"

From the author of *La Double Méprise* and *Mateo Falcone*, these strictures come oddly; but their sincerity is entire. For not only twenty years divide them, but all the leagues that separate the retreat from Moscow and a tranquil house on the *rive gauche*, Helvetius or the Code Civil from a medley of Spanish and English literature and Homer, an unquiet temperament set on edge by a society of revolutionaries and adventurers from carefully matured gifts. It is a rich and careless personality face to face with a rare artist's intelligence; when the Indian explorer, Jacquemont (another of the band, and one of Mérimée's friends for whose "stoic" character he

will ever profess admiration) dashes on to the edge of one of Beyle's manuscripts, "*Détestable*; *style d'épicier*"—Mérimée would assuredly concur. We understand with ease how in the famous and elusive pamphlet, *H.B.*, dedicated in 1850 to the memory of Stendhal, Mérimée could say: "We had perhaps not a single point of view in common", for the *but de l'art* stretched its spikes always between them; and in any case, he adds: "We were, nevertheless, good friends and always charmed to re-open our discussions". But, elsewhere, we hit on this: "Few men have pleased me more; there is not one whose friendship has been more precious to me"; and we realise also that in 1852, when he is absorbed in Beyle's correspondence, he admits to the Inconnue: "It is as if I were conducting the autopsy of a man's thoughts whom I have known intimately, and whose ideas on men and things have left an imprint on my own, to a singular extent". The riddle of the inter-playing action and re-action is not so quickly resolved.

The truth is that through all this shadow-boxing, as it were, whenever they can manage, like Tweedledum and Tweedledee, to forget their quarrel and its reason, and take stock of the elements that should unite them in a common pleasure, their concreteness must surprise them. They are at one in their insensibility to the magic of verse, Beyle finding Rossini far more palatable, and Mérimée unable to find in the Parnys and Delilles of his schooldays any incentive to rapture.[1] The intellectual palace of each

[1] M's one lapse into verse is worth glancing at:

"Les hannetons, fils du printemps,
Que se nourrissent de verdure,
Font les délices des enfants,
Et l'ornement de la nature".

of them is built on a solid eighteenth century base, however roomy and fantastic the chambers. The candid reasonableness of d'Holbach has early taken possession of Beyle's inmost thoughts, the same that has left Mme Mérimée's eyes unclouded with spiritual questionings, and become an intrinsic part of Prosper's outlook on the world. But more significant yet is the definition of Mérimée's attitude to life and letters outlined by Sainte-Beuve, with his accustomed penetration: "At the time of the first Romantic innovations in France, he seems, for his part, to have desired only to accept and encourage its vigorous, energetic side, with its reality and its wide field for observation; let others affection the theory or the melody, the vapour and the cloud; he, in his hatred for the conventional, mistrustful of phrases, adopts a mixture of positivism and dis tinction." What could make more appeal to the passionate, restless nature of Beyle than this attraction of Mérimée towards the adventurous, the independent, the lawless? A thousand pities that the "distinction", at this period, taking the form of an airy indifference to all emotions and a tail-coat from Savile Row, prevents his young friend from stepping into the frame of a Fabrice del Dongo; the industrious fireside over the river, to say nothing of the fear of ridicule, holds him back from so Milanese an escapade. But, consciously or not, the precocious Prosper of 22 and the ripe Beyle are irremediably chained to each other by this attraction towards that half of the human race, which is not only for them always the more significant, but which renders the other, in its presence, empty of charm.

Even here, however, the two struggle in their bonds. As *De l'Amour* would suggest, with its half-terrifying, half-absurd dissection of the inflamed masculine heart, women and their conquest are, in reality, the "whole existence" of Beyle. Mérimée's life, too, is no less besieged with feminine eyes, feminine hands, feminine *billets-doux*. The rustle of their dresses is as the natural accompaniment of his footsteps; he is infinitely drawn towards them, and they are no slower than usual to melt before this solicitous warmth. Neither he nor Beyle can lay claim to the physique of an Adonis; Beyle, horribly aware of his ugliness, is often struck mute with nervousness. Mérimée, glib and less swayed by passion, does not lack *bonnes fortunes*; the purlieus of the Tivoli or the Café Momues are fruitful, and even the more refined alcoves, the salons of an ostensible propriety, are not unkind. He has no aversion to being looked on as a potential Byron; the dress, the look in the eye, the dry, stinging word are all calculated to hint at the comparison, if there be those present who are disposed to make it. He has that seemingly *terre-à-terre* way of pointing out the limitations of women, the tides and temperatures of their feelings, of detailing their advantages like a horse-dealer before a new mare, which will never cease to perplex the Anglo-Saxon and which every Frenchman, for whom things are very much what they seem. finds both agreeable and natural. But when Beyle states, in all seriousness, that he has no opinion of a man who does not find a quarter of an hour in a woman's company sufficient for him to make quite definite suggestions to her, that that is her due, and

writes to inform Mérimée that the Contessa X. has abruptly, after weeks of "*voi*", addressed him with "*tu*", and asks "if he should violate her", although Mérimée does not hesitate to urge him to do so, he must inevitably be smiling, with the corner of his mouth downturned, at this obstinate clank of the cavalryman's sword. Whatever swiftness and forcefulness should characterize the man's approach to his idol, Mérimée would rather reserve comment on it for a story or a play; if his own Byronics have a tinge of unreality, he holds them to be at least superior as a veil for the true sentiment to this condottiere manner of offering one's heart. And then, it is hardly flattering to oneself to suggest the need for insisting with such brutality on the gratification of desire.

But, subtle or cold, these two feminists, divided by the *but de l'art*, take the same path to the *but de la vie*. Mérimée, with considerable ease and much relish, enters on the course of initiation into the pleasures of the town which constitute still the "finishing school" of the young Frenchman. He has none of the obstacles of Beyle's youth to affront, poverty, timidity, a dislocated Europe. The cosmopolis of the boulevards, the Palais Royal, that temple of frivolity, where "the most virginal doubts came to an end, where our burning curiosity could be assuaged", as Balzac recalls in the *Lys dans la Vallée*, prove to be more than pleasant tutors. While Beyle is applauding La Pasta in Verdi's *Othello*, Mérimée is elbowing his way through the crowd of artists and *grisettes*, of dandies in their long tailcoats and their trousers of casimir, catching a wave of

Lubin's last perfume, and repressing a laugh at the sight of the corpulent *parvenus*, with their huge fobs and their insolence. He is, most likely, taking his way to a supper at the Rocher de Cancale; but if his mind is dwelling on the joyous evening to come and the merits of Delacroix of the tormented face, the cynical de Mareste and Jacquemont as boon companions, he misses not an atom of this free spectacle. His bright, leonine eyes, behind the seeming indifference of a reveller in a hurry, are busy marking traits, registering a lightning conclusion from the glimpse of this Mimi Pinson or that *galant*. His letters to Beyle, who even at Milan desires not to lose touch with the band of merrymakers, edify us on this score more, perhaps, than some would wish; one in particular, which gives, in crudest detail, the account of a bet made by Musset to carry out a prodigy of debauch and of his regrettable failure, offers a key to Mérimée's admissions of later days. "*J'étais devenu un grand vaurien*", he recalls, but only "for three years". This we may well believe, for even were it not for his sardonic reserve and his eternal observation of his surroundings, it is probably that the worst agonies of *Katzenjammer* could not keep him from adding on the morrow to his store of abstruse knowledge. His attraction to the magnet of erudition has not failed to rouse the protests of Beyle, whose natural genius can see no object in the diligent study of Greek. "You are on the battle-field", he has already cried out to the Mérimée of 1823; "you are past the moment of polishing your gun; you must fire." But Mérimée is not deterred; he will have his amorous fling, rejoice in the perfection of a

salmon and a roast, washed down with a choice Burgundy; but he is always capable of leaving the drunken band at one in the morning, creeping up the stairs of the silent house in the rue des Beaux Arts, and delving for an hour or two in a treatise on cameos or theology.

Nevertheless, since the evil that men do, especially in the public gaze, does not fail to live after them, it is comprehensible that the ghost of his Restoration self became an inconvenient shadow. "Curiosity drove me to it", he confesses. But the world cannot be expected to distinguish between the inquisitiveness of the artist and the abandon of the debauchee; it will be forgotten that a man has remarked that the "*rats d'Opéra* have their points, but you must take them for what they are worth", and remembered that he once spent a deal of time in their company, hanging about the wings, or whirling similar beings round the Bal Musard. "I have spent my life being praised for qualities I never possessed and condemned for faults which were not mine." Thus the "wicked" M. Mérimée, oddly unconscious that the general look only on the façade, and that in 1832, his own cynical head, ubiquitous in the bazaars of pleasure, would have troubled more than one student of human nature.

## II

But by 1832, these ventures into Vanity Fair have not prevented success and more than a modicum of fame falling to Mérimée's lot. As he leans back in his

office chair at his Ministry, ruminating on the stupidity of the Comte d'Argout, his tasteless chief and on the cheap machinations of his colleagues, his thoughts can stray to the last four years, and see not a black interlude in the clear white thread of his life.

As far as literature is concerned, if he is not satisfied (and few artists are satisfied), it is none the less creditable to have followed up the imperfect *Cromwell*, with a pair of beautifully-organized literary hoaxes, *Le Théâtre de Clara Gazul* and *La Guzla*. Then he has paid a vague tribute to Scott with a definite assault on history, *La Chronique de Charles IX*, relieved with a dissertation on the Saint-Bartholomew and a plausible intrigue. If *La Jacquerie*, a succession of scenes from the tumultuous Middle Ages, and *La Famille Carvajal*, a bloodthirsty reminder of Beatrice Cenci and her fate, have carried him no further, except to establish him as one of the chieftains of the Romantic clan, his first *nouvelles*, *La Vénus d'Ille*, *Tamango*, *Le Vase Etrusque*, *Mateo Falcone*, *La Partie de Trictrac*, and *L'Enlèvement de la Redoute* have given the signal that some absolutely new and powerful elixir has been brewed out of turmoils of his youth. And his thirst for character and for vivid encounters has been several times over gratified. Shakespeare's country has been visited, in the spring of 1826; Delacroix and Duvergier de Hauranne, Delécluze and he fell straight into election-time; they witnessed some epic fisticuffs between rival opinions at Preston and Appleby, and followed all the agitated procedure of Sir Robert Wilson's elections—humanity at its rawest. What joy for the eyes and memory! He called on Hazlitt

and Thomas Lawrence, who struck him as "one of the century's finest portrait-painters", had the good fortune to make lasting friendships with the jovial profligate, Sutton Sharpe, and the wealthy Ellice, an intimate of Byron's circle, and the owner of a "cottage" near Inverness where Mérimée is destined to gloat over many a grouse. Finally there has been last year that enchanting dash to Spain, with an arm in a sling. ("*Je me suis battu avec quelqu'un qui n'aimait pas ma prose*", he passed it off airily, but it was clear that there was a petticoat at the back of it); memories swim before him of the baked sierras, of the gipsies ready to melt at the sight of a douro, of his dinner with Sevilla the matador, and most diverting of all, of the day when he ate from the convict's bowl—for, although he has "no predilection for the *canaille*", yet, after all, when we set aside convention and rule, it is surely possible "to find *savoir-vivre* elsewhere than in a drawing-room of the Faubourg St Germain." And then, just when he was beginning to understand that a well conducted bull-fight "kills all dramatic art", and had encountered a woman of infinite culture and charm, the wife of the Comte de Teba, who had opened for him the door into the true Spain, gorgeous and filthy, all gold and black, when he was daily spinning tales for the little Paca and Eugenia, his inconvenient countrymen had spoilt his siesta. The barricades in the Rue Saint-Antoine had been erected and bloodily pierced, Charles X had lumbered off disgruntled to England; Mérimée, with a passing word of regret that he had missed the *Trois Glorieuses* ("performances", he called them, always appreciative of

a spectacle had returned to Paris and found himself thrust into the fourth battery of the *garde nationale*, surnamed the "Death-Dealing" from the number of doctors in its ranks. More satisfactory, from the point of view of the bored dilettante in his blue tunic and red-striped trousers, had been the presence at his side of Alexandre Dumas: at least, between the inane parades, they had been able to exchange views on architecture and books. Sitting now, well-groomed and contented with the official silence of his room in "Apollinaire's"[1] Ministry, he recalls with disgust the "banality and stupidity" of the riots, in which "never a drop of blood is shed, and yet, the sight of them is more gloom-inspiring than that of a battlefield".

Possibly, Mérimée had confided this superficial impression to others than Stendhal, his correspondent of the time. An odd story had subsequently gone the round; he had observed a rioter firing most inexpertly at the Swiss guard in the windows of the Louvre; going up to him, he had politely borrowed the weapon, and with his first shot scored an obvious bulls-eye. The owner had remarked with a laugh: "Since you are so good a marksman, you had better continue", but Mérimée had politely returned the carbine, adding that he was, unfortunately, not of the same political thinking. The bureaucrat Byron in his correct trousers bears the truth of this marked on his cold brow, we may think; but it is never safe to jump to conclusions where the subtle Mérimée is concerned; the tale has not the least foundation, for he was, as we have seen, absent in Spain when

[1] Comte d'Argout.

the Louvre was being assailed. "What is the reason of it all? Is it the difficulty of deciding which is the more wearisome personage, Odilon Barrot or Dupin?" Mérimée, like all artists a fanatic for order, if a discreet one, had gone no further than this in his comments on the July disturbances. How much more sensible is this mode of living that he has adopted, comfortably ensconced as *chef de Cabinet*, ready to follow in "Apollinaire's" train to any fresh ministry; (there have already been two leaps from the Admiralty to the "Ministry of the Interior and Cults"), provided that the salary suffices to pay for the dinners at the Café de Paris, and the odious "*racaille*" that make up his staff do not gall him to distraction!

For the rest, no pride in these spring laurels is to be read on this smooth, not over refined face or the alert eyes. Stendhal is "not over sure of his heart, but quite sure of his talent". Impossible to decide before this well-bred and non-committal expression that either one of these declarations affects him; his glance falls to the finger of his hand that bears an engraved stone in a ring; "Μέμνησο ἀπιστεῖν."—"Beware of believing". In all likelihood, literary fame has the fragility of a throne, and as for his heart, that concerns no one but himself.

But if Mérimée wears his laurels with the nonchalance of a dandy who has bought a hat of a new form and would not for the world have it noticed, we are entitled to pass judgment on their green and their thickness. Whatever the power of reconstructive imagination, it cannot call up for us the daily

fervour of the early Romantic campaigns. In our remoteness, we cannot but be astonished that in 1825, as, one by one, the dramatic tableaux that make up the *Théâtre de Clara Gazul* were read aloud to the *cénâcle*, each, whatever its merits, meant by the fearless novelty of its conception yet another inch of ground won from the classical enemy. We can still take a mild amusement in the ingenious preface, which, written by "Joseph l'Estrange", sets forth the romanesque biography of Clara Gazul, "Spanish actress and playwright", and in her portrait, which is merely the mocking face of Mérimée framed with a mantilla, a waggish invention of Delécluze. What strikes us yet overwhelmingly in the detail of this literary practical joke is the immense cleverness. It is not only that of an exceptionally cultivated youth; the listeners at the reading were struck with "the inexorable boldness with which a writer of so tender an age already painted the maladies of the human heart."[1] Already his psychological "realism" peeps through these melodramas, gives a spice to their coarse flavour; the unscrupulous spy of *Les Espagnols en Danemarck*, Mme de Tourville, is studied as if from nature; *L'Occasion* contains a portrait of a young girl, Mariquita, and her luckless infatuation for the director of her Convent, which is a model of penetration; even Ines Mendo, though she forms part of a truly pasteboard tragedy, has a pathetic existence that is not unreal to us. As for *Le Carrosse du Saint Sacrement*, we must conclude that its audacious twitching of the Church's robes quelled

[1] M. Tourneux.

the admiration of Mérimée's contemporaries; alone of the batch has it some claim to being considered a masterpiece. The tone of this sparkling comedy, wherein an actress of Lima fools the gouty Viceroy to the top of his bent, wheedles him into making her a present of a sumptuous coach, and then with a superb gesture gives it to the Church, to be used thereafter for carrying the sacraments to the bedside of the dying, is of an impeccable humour, taste itself applied to fantasy.

But the author's obsession of poking fun at the religious calling makes him elsewhere lose his habitual sense of measure; the monks and inquisitors of *Le Ciel et L'Enfer* and *Une Femme est un Diable* are denied the inoffensive gluttony and lecherousness that distinguishes them in the novels of Anatole France and other sceptics; they fill the *rôles* of the most abject hypocrites, or are rendered inhumanly grotesque, turned, even, into the mere mouthpieces of the cynical endings imitated by Mérimée from the Spanish playwrights of the eighteenth century. "Do not think too ill of me for causing the death of these two charming young women", says Fray Eugenio to the public at the end of *L'Occasion*, "and be gracious enough to excuse the errors of the author." The pleasantry does not gain by being harped on. But, if we weary of Mérimée's insistence that all these stabbings, rapes, treacheries and poisonings are not worth a moment's solicitude, we carry away from the reading an appreciation of his directness, the perfect French of a dialogue which may not be that of the theatre, but has the swiftest of movements, and a glimpse, like that seized when torchlight is thrown on a crowded fresco, of a figure

or two brilliant with the colours of a violent life. And there is more. " I see her everywhere . . . her great black eyes, like the eyes of a young cat . . . gentle and wicked at once. . . ." It is the vision of the love-tormented Antonio in " Une Femme est un Diable ". For us, the first sketch of the ideal woman that will haunt Mérimeé's life and art has been thrown on the paper.

After Havana and Galicia, Denmark and Peru, Dalmatia and a brief and quite unfruitful sojourn in New Granada (where Mérimée situates a tragedy of a bloodthirstiness only comparable to the worst excesses of Beaumont and Fletcher, *La Famille Carvajal*, which anyone desirous of becoming acquainted with the situation that dominates it may well throw away, glad to take up *The Cenci* in its place), we are transported in 1828 by this vertiginous Time-and-Space machine to the France of the Middle Ages. The Dalmatian venture of 1827 had been another pretended sop to the imperious demon of " local colour ", and had taken the form of an even more successful hoax than that of the Andalucian Clara. Only twelve copies were sold; but its reputation, by passing many frontiers, made up for its unremunerative career. Years after, Mérimée's preface to a new edition of the *Guzla* described with that twisting of the truth out of shape necessary to maintaining the impression that all he had ever written was done quite *à la légère*, the inception of the original plan. " About the year of grace 1827 ", he began imperturbably, " I was *romantic*. . . . Of poetry, we only admired that of other nations, and the most antique; the ballads of the Scottish border, the romances of the

Cid seemed to us incomparable masterpieces, always on account of the *local colour*". He was burning to visit the various homes of "local colour", but an empty purse barred the way. So Ampère and he, in their desire to "embark at Venice for Trieste and from there to go slowly down the Adriatic coast to Ragusa", thought for a moment of "writing an account of the journey in advance, selling it advantageously, and of employing the profits in finding out if they had been far out in their descriptions."[1] They abandoned the notion, but while they were toying with it, Ampère had entrusted him with making a collection of the original poems of the Illyrians. "To prepare myself, I read the *Journey through Dalmatia* of the Abbé Fortis, and a pretty good statistical account of the old Illyrian provinces. I learned five or six words of Slav (*sic*), and I wrote, in a fortnight, this collection of ballads. The booklet was mysteriously printed at Strasburg, with notes and a portrait of the author. My secret was well kept, and the success was a huge one."

A Serbian writer[2] has devoted a ponderous tome to establishing that Mérimée took infinitely more trouble over this second *supercherie* than over the first, and has compiled a list of ancestors for *La Guzla*. Those who know their sardonic mystifier will content themselves with assuming that his weathercock intelligence, exposed to all the exotic winds blowing over Europe in these years of broken barriers, had perhaps sensed the popularity of such a *tour-de-force* with a generation already half-absorbed

[1] Competitors for the Newdigate Prize must often have been struck with the advantages of this scheme.

[2] M. Yovanovič.

in the brutalities of the Near East conflict, as he had realised in launching the *Théâtre de Clara Gazul*, that the expedition of the Duc d'Angoulême had made Spain the cynosure of all French eyes. In any case, Fauriel, the author of the *Chants Populaires de la Grèce Moderne* (we must jog Mérimée's recollection), had lent him two volumes of Serbian poems, and suggested to him to have a try at the language. Mérimée, with his keen eye for the vogue and nothing loth to graft another branch on to his linguistic tree, acquired enough to concoct these ballads of the bard Hyacinthe Maglanovitch, the "Guzla-player, born at Zuonigrad", who married a Morlaque wife, and lived long among the heiduks, the mountain bandits. Once again we are astounded at the perfection of the counterfeit, even more at the masterly evocation of the legends and figures of this composite land, together with a lyricism in the narrative which, even if Mérimée found it present in all the popular literature of the Balkan states, is none the less miraculously caught and transcribed. When the *Théâtre de Clara Gazul* had appeared, a Spaniard had been heard to mutter in a friend's ear: "Yes, this translation is splendid; but if only you could read the original!" Mérimée's malicious joy over the *Guzla* was more unadulterated still. A signed copy was conveyed to Weimar, but the present did not deter Goethe from "making a wily pretence of solving the riddle for himself, so as to appear clever" (as Mérimée pointed out, pricking the bubble), and from making mysterious allusions in the pages of *Kunst und Altertum* to the anagrammatic closeness of Guzla and Gazul.

Among the poems of Pushkin, too, were what looked like translations from *La Guzla* (" as if *Gil Blas* were to be translated into Spanish ", Mérimée smiled). But his impish delight must have touched its zenith when a Mr Bowring, author of a Slavonic anthology, wrote asking for the originals of his " translations " and a very, very serious Herr Gerhart despatched him two volumes of translated Slav poems, a rendering in verse of the *Guzla* amongst them, which had been easy to do, for underneath the prose, " he had discovered the metre of the Illyrian poetry ". " The Germans discover so many things ", the successful Illyrian remarked. But the *pastiche* had earned its due; its barbarian tang and melodious repetitions do not pall even to-day.

The brief explanation that precedes *La Jacquerie*, the group of sombre tableaux put before a public already inoculated by Defauconpret's translation of the Waverley Novels, and intended " to give an idea of the atrocious life of the 14th century ", has a new and soberer tone which sheds a light on the orientation of Mérimée's talent. It is all very well for him to " reveal " that *La Famille Carvajal* owed its existence to a letter from a " girl of $15\frac{1}{2}$ ", who longed to shudder over a little drama or a novel, " with plenty of crimes in it and passion *à la Lord Byron* ". We surprise the joker in a fit of seriousness when we turn to the preface of *The Jacquerie*. If Stendhal and his doctrines concerning the historic drama are still to the forefront, Byron is totally forgotten. Instead, we are confronted with a scholastic opening: " There exists hardly any

historical information on the Jacquerie: in Froissart, we find but scanty details and all too little impartiality." And the seeming regenerate goes on to justify himself for making a monk, Frère Jean, the head of the peasants' revolt, on the grounds that frequent quarrels stirred up strife at that time between clergy and nobility, and reminds his readers of John Ball. This first overture of Mérimée to Clio, with whom he will flirt at irregular intervals throughout his life, is a droll and unexpected *volte-face*; but it helps to prove how easily, with him, the scholar will out. There was a certain effrontery, too, in reminding a sensitive people of this clash between seigneurs and serfs; but his icy detachment and implacable love of truth let out no hint of his preferences; and we know that the fierce convictions of a Hugo, even the obvious indignation of Vigny in *Cinq Mars* were impossible to him. But the fidelity of the painting put no life into these agitated victims of an unjust age; we should not think of plodding through the scrappy battle-scenes of Shakespeare's "Henry VI"; evocative power and research did not suffice here, either, to animate the monotonous savagery. The canvas is overcrowded; Frère Jean and d'Apremont and Le Loup Garou gesticulate, grimace, and are re-absorbed into the tumult of the affray. "At that time", writes Balzac in the *Cabinet des Antiques*, "the Middle Ages began to exhibit their daggers, drawbridges, coat of mail, hauberks and square-toed shoes, and all their romantic paraphernalia of coloured cardboard." It is typical of Mérimée's lucid and calculating mind that he dwelt no longer on the "coloured cardboard" than

was sufficient for him to exhaust its resources.

Next year, in 1829, his elegant butterfly attention alighted on Brantôme. " In history, nothing but the anecdotes appeal to me ", he confessed. His preoccupation with the particular, the significant trait, the movements of passion or instinct in great lives, the peep into privacy, as it were, (" I would give all Thucydides for the authentic memoirs of Aspasia, or one of Pericles' slaves ", he continued) is quite of a piece with his individualist bent. Stendhal had it too, had long preached its value on all sides; and, although the *Chronique du Règne de Charles IX*, the fruit of Mérimée's sixteenth-century explorations, must have seemed to Stendhal of an elementary psychology compared with his own deductions made from a study of the systems of Cabanis and Lavater, yet his friend's début as a novelist excited the sympathy of the author of *Le Rouge et le Noir* if only by the economy of his descriptions and the sharp outlining of his vivid hero and heroine. For both writers history is the imprint of great men on the world; the herd only interests them by its obedience to these leaders or its rebellion; it exists not to act, but to react. Let us therefore observe the great man, even in his absent moments; from his most trifling gesture, we can build up the perfect model for all the paler manifestations of inferior human hearts. *Vive les caractères d'exception*! In such a phrase lies the essence of that aspect of Romanticism embodied by Stendhal, and with more art and less blind enthusiasm by Mérimée; and when the latter informs the world that he had hardly an idea in common with his early mentor, it means that the tightness

of this chain which bound them always together was inevitably relaxed by usage and time.

The *Chronique*, then, is of a many-sided interest; but if it lives, it is not by virtue of its significant place in Mérimée's literary progress, nor the hint it gives that history, for whatever true reason, will ever be one of his favourite companions for passing a leisure hour; still less by the signs in it once again of Mérimée's religious obsession (did not Diane de Turgis pass for having been drawn on the pattern of a lady, whose favours accorded to Mérimée had been accompanied by efforts to lure him into the Catholic Church?) No; it survives because its author, slowly feeling his way towards the literary medium in which he will soon touch perfection, has afforded himself, by limiting the number of protagonists, a chance of creating characters of breathing flesh and blood. The young Huguenot, de Mergy, and his passionate Comtesse Diane, a ravishing pillar of the opposite faith, stamp themselves on our memory. Not a French schoolboy but must still wish himself into the doublet of the privileged butt for the proselytism of the lovely fanatic. But the bare simplicity of the tale commends it to other than schoolboys; the "local colour" is not plastered on with a palette knife, but brushed in in sparing touches; and Mérimée, who has a horror of descriptions, has given life to his figures by other means than dwelling on the splendours of the Court Life, and the brilliant accoutrement of the nobles. For him, there is but the action that counts; and if the record of successive and typical actions cannot build up a character so that it resembles a mortal being, why, he will throw up the glove at

once. With the *désinvolture*, the standing aside from a work to look at it that was the height of fashion in 1829, he abruptly inserts a "Dialogue between the author and his reader", which puts his case so clearly that it must, he feels, leave no room for carping.

> "Ah, Mr Author, what a splendid opportunity you have here of making portraits! And *what* portraits! . . . You are going to show it us, this Franco-Italian court? Introduce to us one by one all the characters who distinguish themselves in it. . . .
>
> "Alas, Mr Reader, what is that you are asking me for? I should be glad indeed to have talent enough to write a History of France; I should give up writing tales. . . .
>
> "What! You transport me to the year 1572, and you intend to skip over the portraits of those men, all so remarkable! . . .
>
> "Whom would you like picked out?
>
> "Well! In the first place, Charles IX . . . Describe first his costume, then you must paint him physically for me, and after that, morally; that is the highroad along which proceed to-day all the composers of novels."

But Mérimée, as we see, never keeps long to a highroad, and is now, in any case, groping towards a very private path of his own; and then, he has never been able to hold himself back from twitting modes in literature, in spite of being up till now one of the first to adopt each of them. The scenes of the mercenaries at the inn near Etampes, the chapter which sets in relief the young courtiers and their quarrelsomeness, with Mergy's first sight of the

Countess, on a white mule, her black velvet mask permitting to guess " that her skin was of a dazzling whiteness and the eyes of a dark blue " ; the rapid conduct of the duel, the glimpses of Saint Bartholomew's massacre, and the pathos of the close, when the wars of religion have brought death to Charles de Mergy by his own brother's hand ; all these qualities set us quickly in opposition to Mérimée's contemporary of that ironical dialogue. Less grave than de Vigny, less occupied with the mere chain of events, than Dumas, he holds our attention in the *Chronique* by the very whittling away of unnecessary action that perplexed the reviewers of 1829. And this clarity of form which caused one of them to remark that the author had employed the language which our forefathers spoke and heard and wrote, to interpret the new ideas (the mind flies to André Chénier), is seconded by certain details worthy of the sensibility of times much nearer our own. When Diane, invincibly drawn towards Mergy, asks him if he does not think that the gift of herself could be an agent in his conversion, and when she is in his arms, implores him to renounce his heresy : " If I could save your soul, all my sins would be forgiven me ; those we have committed together, those we may still commit—all that would be pardoned us. Yes ! Yes ! our sins will have been the instrument of our salvation "—it would be unfair to take the laugh that Mergy represses as the sneer of an unbeliever. Rather has Mérimée conferred on him momentarily his own vision of that extraordinary shade of perversion, the unforeseen ratiocination of a woman torn between her carnality and her faith.

Already in the winter of 1828, Mérimée, in the fever of creation that besets a mind open to all influences between the ages of 20 and 30, had written to Stapfer: "I am doing an amazing quantity of work: with the aid of Heaven, I shall blacken some paper in 1829." The celestial powers must have, for reasons characteristically obscure, been well disposed indeed to one who paid them, as a rule, very little homage. They presided benignantly over his evolution, his gradual moulding of an artistic formula which was to remain his own, without danger of rivals, so personal was it; they watched him discard mantillas and fur bonnets, and leaving the mania for pseudonyms to Beyle, who never signed a letter with the same name twice in succession and imagined himself still under the hawk-eyes of Fouché's ubiquitous police, enter the list under his own blazon: "the Black Knight of the great Romantic tournament", as George Brandès has called him. Black and heavily vizored he remains, it is true, behind the cruelties of *Mateo Falcone* or *Le Vase Etrusque*, no enthusiastic or even moved face is to be discerned; he has given up treating horrors as a jest, but since they form an integral part of life, the alternative is a rocky stoicism, not a muscle of the mouth moving; as for a tear, *à quoi cela servirait-il*?

*Mateo Falcone* is a story of that island where Mérimée, discontented with being only acquainted with the Morgans and Mandrins of tradition, consoled himself in his search for passion and violence with real outlaws, real vengeances and feminine fury. "Imagine", he writes, "a man of moderate height, but robust, with crinkling hair

as black as a jay, an aquiline nose, thin lips, big bright eyes, and a complexion like the top of a boot." This figure, briefly summed up in Mérimée's Spartan manner of describing, a worthy mate for Colomba has a small son. One afternoon, when he and his wife have gone to inspect one of their herds, the boy Fortunato, left at home to guard the house, hears shots in the *maquis*. Soon after, a man badly wounded in the thigh runs limping up to the house. For a piece of silver, Fortunato consents to hide the fugitive bandit in a thick pile of hay. Before long the *voltigeurs* approach, arms of the law in brown and yellow uniforms. Fortunato feigns the completest ignorance of Gianetto Sanpiero's whereabouts; he was asleep, the only passer has been the priest, and he has no more seen a man in a pointed bonnet of black velvet, and a red-and-yellow embroidered waistcoat than the man in the moon. Suddenly, the corporal has an inspiration. A silver watch is dangled before the child's eyes. The bait is well chosen. Fortunato "showed well on his face the struggle in his heart between covetousness and the respect due to hospitality. His naked chest rose with an effort, as if he were stifling. But the watch shook, turned round and round, and now and then jogged the tip of his nose. At last, bit by bit, he raised his right hand towards the watch; the end of his fingers touched it; and it lay heavily in his hand, although the corporal still held it by the chain . . . the face was of blue enamel . . . the case had been newly repaired . . . in the sunlight it seemed to be all of fire . . . the temptation was too strong," and with a gesture over his shoulder

the boy indicates the pile of hay, and runs off.

As the soldiers are binding their prisoner, the father and mother appear on the scene. "The fellow defended himself like a lion," explains the corporal: "he killed one of my *voltigeurs* . . . and he had hidden himself so cleverly . . . had it not been for my little cousin, Fortunato, I should never have routed him out." "Fortunato!" cries Mateo Falcone." The corporal tells him of the watch. "*Malédiction*!", says Mateo, under his breath. He advances to his door. Gianetto smiles oddly at him, and, turning round on his litter, spits on the threshold. "House of a traitor!" As a rule, the word would have brought on its utterer a slashing blow from a knife; but Mateo merely raised his hand to his forehead with a gesture of oppression. The soldiers move off with their capture. "A fine beginning!" Mateo stares at his son, in a concentrated rage. Then, turning to his wife, he asks: "Wife, this child is mine?" "What are you saying, Mateo? You know whom you are speaking to?" The woman turns a fiery red; the child whimpers. Mateo moves down into the maquis, and calls to Fortunato to follow him. "He is your son!" quavers the mother. "Leave me alone", answers Mateo: "I am his father." Two hundred paces away, in a little ravine, he halts. "Fortunato, go and stand over by that big stone." The child obeys, then kneels down. "Say your prayers." "Father, father, don't kill me!" "Say your prayers!" repeats Mateo in a terrible voice. The child sobs through a Pater and Credo. "Are those all the prayers you know?" The child remembers an Ave Maria and a litany:

"A long one, too", says Mateo, "but no matter." And then, with a "God pardon you!" he lifts his gun and, regardless of Fortunato's last effort to embrace his father's knees, fires. Giuseppa, his wife, runs up in terror as he returns to look for a spade. "What have you done?" "Justice." "Where is he?" "In the ravine. I am going to bury him. He died in the Christian faith; I will have a mass sung for his soul. Let them tell my son-in-law, Tiodoro Bianchi, to come and live with us."

French is the curtest of languages when it desires to be, and Mérimée makes it even curter than its wont. The softer fall of English prose, even in literal translation, puts into this relentless tale a pitifulness which is utterly absent from the original. That it is worth translating must surely leap to the eye; for its qualities of pure art, courageous realism, and dramatic sense cannot be dulled even by a rendering into a language as different as our own. But even more extraordinary is the thought that Mérimée was 26 when he wrote this story, and that with it he attained the height of his gifts, carved out a magnificent cameo that he will never surpass; and he lived to be sixty-seven. It enchants us as a pure work of art, because it has all the disinterested and useless beauty of a masterpiece, without being situated in a *féerie* or a fantasy. Its sensationalism is tempered by a measure so impeccable that to add or subtract from it even a word would seem an impertinence; and it must be remembered that even to-day the press often has wind of stories which prove how near the conventions of Corsican manners still run to this apparent exception. If it excites the

moralist's reprobation, we can answer that not only can Falcone's action compare very favourably, for a certain grand rigidity in the cult of honour, with incidents, for example, of Roman history which no one thinks of condemning, but that the business of Mérimée's art is to observe, and, provided that his choice of event does not overstep the bounds of probability, we have no right to go "looking for midday at fourteen o'clock", as they say in his country.

As for the "romanticism" of this vignette, we cannot help feeling that the return to French ground instanced by *La Jacquerie* and the *Chronique* has infected Mérimée permanently with some of the native reasonableness that rules there, so that however far afield his restless fancy takes him in the future, moderation will become inseparable from his vision and choice of form. And, more precious still, his sense of the dramatic passes straight into these vivid tableaux without being hampered by the necessity of creating a dialogue suitable for the stage —a feat Mérimée hardly ever contrived to perform. With his quick judgment, he had realised that for the stage it is necessary to fill out and to pad; and in all but *Le Carrosse* (which, being a comedy, could be stuffed with a wit and phraseology akin to that of his own time), his padding had taken the form of plastering on indiscriminately the results of his historical researches and making the characters positively sticky with "local colour". No wonder he laughed at it in 1849; it had deluded him earlier into thinking that he could win some of Shakespeare's success without Shakespeare's poetry, and there had even been flaming partisans, like the headlong

Ampère,[1] to encourage him in this dogged pursuit of an ideal cried from the housetops by Stendhal. To his credit be it added that he was not long in declaring himself "unadapted to writing for the stage". Because he had neither the gift of *arranging* action for the theatre, nor the lyricism which can palliate and relieve a flimsy intrigue, he could not find the key to effectiveness in the drama; and yet his leaning towards what was dramatic in the relations of beings real to him and not figureheads of history was so pronounced that readers of the *nouvelles* wondered why his name figured so rarely on the posters of the Paris theatres.

History, however, seduced him again once at least as the *Revue de Paris* month by month eagerly demanded these unusual *contes cruels*. It is true that he chose in it, as was his wont, an incident smelling of blood and terror. "The most sceptical among us has his moments of religious belief, and under whatever guise it presents itself, the extraordinary finds always some chord that quivers responsively in the human heart. But the first condition, for those who desire to exploit our credulity, is that they themselves should believe. When I read in bed, on an evening, some ghost-story or other, I shudder at the creaking of the woodwork, provided that the author shows himself as convinced, and as timorous as I am. But if he begins by giving himself out as a being superior to this weakness, then goodbye to terror." Thus Mérimée, in writing, at a much later date, on the tales of Pushkin, laid down the rule for those who

[1] "A Shakespeare is born to us!" he had cried out on the appearance of the *Théâtre de Clara Gazul*.

want to make the flesh creep. *La Vision de Charles XI* adroitly brings in history to confirm its truth. It tells of a document existing among Swedish archives which bears the signatures of Charles Wasa the Eleventh, and three of his loyal servants, testifying that, one autumn evening, the king observed lights on the opposite side of his palace courtyard, and having walked towards them along a gallery hung with black hangings, certainly not spread by any member of his household, entered a hall. "A vast assembly filled the benches. The four Orders[1] were seated each in their place. All were dressed in black, and this multitude of human faces, standing out luminous against the dark background, so dazzled the eyes of the four witnesses of this amazing sight, that none of them could find in the throng a face known to him." And then before their horror-struck gaze, time and space being annulled in the phantom world, the whole gruesome scene of the future assassination of King Gustave III by Ankarstroem, and the beheading of the criminal, was performed in a red and black silence. The head rolled to the feet of Charles XI; and when, after he had summoned the Judge to answer him, with the old formula: "If you are of God, speak: if of the Other, leave us in peace", and been answered by a prophecy of woe to the dynasty of the Wasa, the vision faded with a melodious murmur, there remained on his slipper a red stain. Mérimée cannot be accused of not keeping his own rules. The story, of a real beauty in spite of its sobriety, deserves to be better known.

[1] Nobility, clergy, bourgeois and peasants.

It would be curious to know if Wilberforce ever read *Tamango*. Mérimée, with his eye for the most prominent question of the day, published the adventure of the slave-trading Captain Ledoux and the gigantic negro ten months before the first law was passed that put an end to this chaffering over human beings. There was a piquant reminiscence of Swift and Voltaire in setting the Europeans in a detestable light as opposed to the simple and heroic black, and Mérimée, who ranges far on the track of primitive virtues, must have smiled to think of his predecessors and their bitterness. As for himself, he has no intention of letting us wallow in our pity. Tamango, the black agent for the slave-trade on the African coast, goes aboard a brig crammed with sold negroes, because Captain Ledoux has taken advantage of a drunken fit on his part to take from him his wife, Ayché. The voyage is marred with the most terrible adventures, the blacks break into revolt, Tamango at their head, fling the white crew overboard, become helpless with liquor, drift for days in ignorance of the way to control those two white demons, the compass and the steering wheel; finally they crowd into the ship's dinghy in the hope of understanding better a craft more like those of their rivers, but it is sunk by a heavy sea. At the end of a few days, Tamango and Ayché are the sole survivors of those who have struggled back to the brig, and before long on a pitch-black night of storm, she leaves him. Tamango is picked up at last by an English frigate, just breathing, and thin as a mummy. But do you think his life was all tragedy? Casually Mérimée adds: "They gave him his liberty, that is to say,

they made him work for the government; but he had threepence a day and his food. He was a fine looking man. The Colonel of the 75th noticed him and took him to be cymbal player in his regimental band. He learned a little English; but he spoke very little. On the other hand, he drank more rum and taffia than was good for him. He died in hospital of an inflammation of the chest." "*La vie n'est jamais ni aussi bonne ni aussi mauvaise qu'on ne pense*", de Maupassant has written. "Certainly", answers Mérimée, "but don't let us say it with such bluntness."

*Tamango* is the last wide fling of Mérimée's intellectual lasso, where his tales are concerned. *La Perle de Tolède*, two pages of musical prose, written round a fanciful incident inspired, perhaps, by the Romancero del Cid and forming a kind of glittering Spanish pendant to the *Guzla*, cannot count as an exotic venture. *Carmen* will be brought into the narrow sphere of modern existence, for Don José ostensibly tells his hard story to the author himself, while it was a matter of common knowledge that Mérimée drew *Colomba* after a tour of her island in 1840; and even *Lokis*, that last, rather desperate throw of a stiff arm, is told in the form of a story overheard, as if its author were too tired to create or willing only to delve into his own recollections. Even in *L'Enlèvement de la Redoute* and *La Partie de Trictrac*, which belong also to this year of fertility, 1829, Mérimée makes a concession to credibility by putting the recital in the mouths of two men who might well have been his contemporaries. As his work gains in firmness, we observe with what constancy he puts his own time to contribution for strong,

stoical, or brutal figures; beause he has not the vivifying gift which can pullc historical character from its niche and pass into it the fluid of life, he lets them sink back into their faded mmobility, and evokes being of his age less antagonistic to his limited, but always modern irradiation.

*L'Enlèvement de la Redoute* draws him once again near to Stendhal, and not only on account of its realism which is exactly that of the opening chapter in *La Chartreuse de Parme.* Although its hero, the teller of the tale, is a smart young officer fresh from " the salon of Mme de B., rue de Provence ", plunged at his baptism of fire into a more than perilous advance on a fort, we are not irritated, as we might expect to be, by an affectation of dandyishness under the hail of bullets; we find neither Satanism nor Elizabethan holocausts. There is less painting, less dwelling on the confusion than in Stendhal's superb description, but for seriousness, the two weigh equally in the balance. The frankness of war; the captain makes a grimace on learning that his only stand-by is this young lieutenant newly arrived on the scene, civility goes by the board; the superstitions of the hoary campaigners—a red moon, presaging bloodshed, a man convinced that he will come out of the fight without a scratch, because the soldier at his side has been killed; the newcomer's conscious sangfroid, as he flips away the dust a bullet has thrown on to his sleeve; the confusion of the attack on the redoubt: " We fought breast to breast, in the midst of so thick a smoke, that we could distinguish no one "; the surprise after this apparently futile frenzy, to find that they have

reached their goal; and the incomparable close which, so that the point be not lost, had better be presented in its original tongue.

*" Où est le plus ancien capitaine ? " demandait-il (le Colonel) à un sergent.*

*Le sergent haussa les épaules d'une manière très expressive.*

*" Et le plus ancien lieutenant ? "*

*" Voici monsieur qui est arrivé hier ", dit le sergent d'un ton tout-à-fait calme.*

*Le colonel sourit amèrement.*

*" Allons, monsieur ", me dit-il, " vous commandez en chef, faites promptement fortifier la gorge de la redoute avec ces chariots, car l'ennemi est en force ; mais le général va vous faire soutenir."*

*" Colonel ", lui dis-je, " vous êtes grièvement blessé ? "*

*" F—— e, mon cher, mais la redoute est prise ! "*

The *panache* of it, floating above the grimy aftermath of the fight! Our generation does not, it is to be presumed, need reminding that bullets are an unrivalled opiate for good manners; but Stendhal must have been delighted to see the reminder administered to the curly-haired bloods of the Restoration. Scarron, in his *Roman Comique*, has a word to say on a similar question. " The Spaniards ", he recounts, " have the secret of composing short stories which they call *Novels*, which are much better suited to us and nearer the reach of humanity than these imaginary heroes of olden times, who are addicted sometimes to an inconvenient excess of good behaviour and manners; and further, examples that we can imitate are certainly of as great a utility as those we can hardly rise to imagine."

Mérimée, who was familiar with the novels of Cervantes, would doubtless have been of Scarron's mind, had he ever given a thought to the moral effect of his own; but he was certainly more satisfied with having rounded off an implacable piece of observation.

Passing quickly over *Les Mécontents*, an inane drawing-room comedy dashed off, probably, between a supper and a rendezvous, whose sole interest is its presentation of certain grotesques chosen from the Ultras, always "hushing" about a conspiracy with their elderly fingers to their lips, whose sole excuse is the inevitable wit in its lines, we come to *La Partie de Trictrac*, and *Le Vase Etrusque*. *Trictrac*, the relaxation of Balzac's distinguished old *émigrés*! . . . played here by the light of ship's candles between the naval lieutenant, Roger, and a fat, blond Dutchman who sleepily loses forty thousand francs, and goes off apparently unperturbed, only to be found the next day with his brains blown out. Roger confesses to his mistress, Gabrielle, a little actress with a character all her own, that he has cheated. For the first time since the "Chronique", the scent of a woman's passing impregnates the dramatic unrolling of events in Mérimée's stories; who knows, some voice had protested, from the languor of an alcove, against the ban he had seemed to set on them; for Ayché and Falcone's wife had been mere adjuncts. But is not the coquette Gabrielle who chains our attention to *La Partie de Trictrac*, nor the fact that we re-discover in her waywardness, her primitive generosity, her power to hurt her lovers the marks of yet another incarnation of

Mérimée's feline ideal; it is the almost physiological haunting of the lieutenant by his lapse from honour. The reasonings of his friend, those of his mistress reinforced by tears and embraces, the passing of time all fail to dispel the neurosis. In a disastrous action against an English vessel, Roger receives a volley of grape-shot in the stomach. "Throw me overboard", he cried out with horrible oaths and seizing me by my coat-tails. "You see I cannot recover, throw me into the sea, I cannot see our flag lowered". . . . His wound was certainly mortal." The young ensign lays this flattering unction to his soul, and as the flag flutters down the broken mast . . . we are permitted to think that the tormented soul found oblivion—or rather, *cosi è se vi pare*, for Mérimée airily leaves the question hanging. It is so difficult to be serious *all* the time.

After so much lending of our emotions to be used as a springboard for his mental agility, what reason is there why, before *Le Vase Etrusque*, we should not rise in revolt? It is fortunate for our elegant joker that, from the beginning of time, a reader of tales remains amiable and gullible to the end. But it would nevertheless be a natural vengeance to hoist Mérimée with his own petard. Auguste Saint Clair "was born with a tender and loving heart, but at an age when we are too easily susceptible to impressions that will remain all our lives with us, his sensibility, too ready to manifest itself, had earned him the sarcasms of his companions." "But, in all likelihood, it was the best thing for him; any boy of character would have adapted himself to the teasing and developed a thick hide." "He was proud and

ambitious, for him opinion had the value it has for children." "The world is not made for weaklings, but please continue." "From that time onwards, he trained himself to conceal all the surface of what he regarded as a disgraceful defect. He attained his end, but the victory cost him dear." "Much ado about nothing!" and so we might persist with our comments, for we have so often started up at Mérimée's "Wolf! Wolf!", and have a great apprehension that this Saint Clair will turn out to be a very fortunate person, after all, or a Don Juan merely playing at being misunderstood. But how much more agreeable to let ourselves glide along on this smooth, pellucid narrative! "He was able to hide from others the movements of a too tender heart; but by repressing them in the depths of his being, he made them a hundred times more painful. In society, he obtained a sad reputation for being cold and careless-hearted; and, in his solitude, his unquiet imagination created for him tortures whose agony was all the more frightful for his unwillingness to confide in anyone."

This is, if ever our writer is capable of sounding it, the note of sincerity; obviously Mateo Falcone could not but be made to follow the dictates of his barbarian soul, and behave like all the bandits we have read of; but sincerity in painting the portrait of a young man of the day! Our surprise is justifiable. But more astonishing is to come; Saint Clair, who passes, nevertheless, among his smart friends for being "obliging, often pleasant, and hardly ever boring" for a quite possible associate, in other words, falls in love, seriously, like a student. He creeps out of Madame de Coursy's country house

just before sunrise, and walks along the country lanes. " He was following a path he seemed to know well. Now he would almost leap for joy, and run along hitting the bushes with his cane; now he would stop or walk slowly, gazing at the sky which was turning a rich red in its eastern quarter. In a word, to see him, you would have said a lunatic had broken out of his cage." Soon he reaches his own cottage. " He threw himself on a big sofa, and there, with a fixed eye, his mouth curving in a gentle smile, he began to think, to give himself over to day-dreams. His fancy called up for him then only blissful thoughts. 'How happy I am!' he repeated every moment. 'At last I have found a heart to understand mine. . . . Yes, it is my ideal that I have found . . . a friend and a mistress in one. . . . What character she has! . . . what a passionate soul. . . . No, she has never loved anyone before me.' And here, suddenly, the whisk of the cloven hoof, Mérimée's inconvenient habit of insisting on the whole truth. Soon, since vanity insinuates itself into all this world's affairs: " She is the loveliest woman in Paris" he thought.[1] And his imagination reviewed for him once again all her charms. " She has chosen me out of them all. She had the best of society numbered among her admirers." (He counts up the more prominent). " She refused herself to them all. . . . and now, I . . . !" Then his refrain began again: " How happy I am! How happy I am!" And he got up to open the window, for he could not breathe; he walked up and down, he rolled on the sofa."

We shall not forget that Mérimée went to the

[1] Stendhal's *De L'Amour* had appeared in 1822.

trouble to paint for us this tremulous springtime, with its slight ridicule for shadows, and the exquisite choice of traits in the disorder of love's fever—all the more because he contents himself once more with letting us tumble out of it, though without his sophisticated sneer this time, into black tragedy. For into the stainless sky of love, a luncheon of Saint-Clair with his friends brings a cloud no bigger than a man's hand. At the moment when " everyone wishes to talk at once, when those whom liquor has not unbalanced begin to have fears for their less steady neighbours ", the talk begins to run first on the theatre, then on Lord Wellington; from him they pass to English horses, and from them, by a chain of ideas easy to catch, to women (" for young men, a fine horse first and next a pretty mistress are the two most desirable objects "). They come eventually to decide with the unanimity of the drunk in disapproval, that their handsome friend, Massigny, who " tied his tie like Brummel " was, nevertheless, an appalling bore. " And yet ", puts in Alphonse de Thémines, " Madame de Coursy, whom you will admit to be a woman of wit if ever there was—can you imagine which among her numerous adorers, was honoured with her favours ? Massigny, the stupidest of men ! " Saint Clair is " on the grill ", as they say; he does not dare to do more than reply dryly, although he is quivering with fury, that " a woman's reputation is a matter of such small importance, no one minds it being torn to pieces as an excuse for a joke "—and then, through his unconsciousness looms up the form of an Etruscan vase he has often seen on the mantelpiece in Mathilde's Paris home; Massigny was the donor of it. And the

bean-stalk of jealousy mounts and mounts in his brain, until it obscures his whole outlook; his meetings with his mistress are so many minutes of bitterness and torment; his nerves are jangled to such a point by persecuting thought that he picks a quarrel one day with de Thémines; the result, the normal one, a duel fixed for the morrow. Saint Clair, thinking that death will be a good deliverance from his nightmare, goes calmly back to the country-house. Mme de Coursy observes his false gaiety and remonstrates tenderly. He answers cynically, makes a harsh remark on this and that; Mathilde remains cool and charming, and offers to tell him a story of Massigny. Tremblingly he begs her to do so, and out it comes, how the "poor absurd" Massigny had written her a letter, calling her the most virtuous woman in Paris and explaining that that disposed him to ask her to be his mistress, how she and her cousin Julie had rocked with laughter over it and how Julie had read it out one, evening before some visitors, of whom Massigny was one and passed it off for being a proposal she herself had received.

Miraculously the clouds have lifted; he falls at her feet with a cry of joy, and begs to be forgiven his odious jealousy, stammering that it was the Etruscan vase which had been its cause. Loosing herself from his embrace, Mathilde seizes the offending object, and dashes it to the ground. "Saint Clair was, for some hours, the most shamefaced and the most happy of men." And the next day, Thémines fires first, and Saint Clair "turns round once and falls dead."

Thus does Mérimée take life by the arm, lead her

forward and demonstrate to all that she is "no better than she should be." But whatever there is of Byronic disillusion in *Le Vase Etrusque*, it is empty entirely of gesticulation or fustian. Without noise or aggressive egotism (and 1830 is the year of *Hernani*), he has achieved, at the age of 27, a supreme distinction in an art of which he is not the inventor, but the renovator of genius. For the first time, he enables us clearly to feel that, in spite of their cursory outlining, his characters stand up in our minds and move about in their tragic simplicity, that we are drawn towards them by a sympathy we can only feel for our human neighbours. The "literature" in the tale is confined to the gentle satire on the contemporary infatuation for things oriental; the blasé young traveller Theodore Neville comes late to the banquet, and bombarded with queries concerning Ibrahim pacha, the dancing-girls, the Pyramids, the Turkish costume he must have brought home ("Etcetera, etcetera", as Mérimée says, with a disdainful wave of the hand), sits down "with his legs crossed" and informs the company that the pyramids are a "regular humbug" (*sic*), that the mere sight of a hieroglyph would make him feel faint, that he has indeed brought back a *metchla*, a *bournous*, and a *khaick* (!), together with a bundle of notes on the Bedouins, Copts and Moghrabins, that the pacha gave him excellent jams in exchange for Charlet's "Costumes of the Imperial Guard", that he took a few lessons in reading the Koran, describes, in a word, "everything from the cedar to hyssop". Mérimée, glad now to occupy a pedestal above the fashion, will repeat in *La Double Méprise* this amiable tweaking of the Oriental fetich's ear.

But, as Saint Clair rides out into the country and affronts in the solitude of his cottage the pangs of his new suspicions, so the calamitous love in the tale is kept severely divided in the author's mind from the thoughtless world, with its facile verdicts on women-folk and novelty-hunting. Mérimée knows that the two are irreconcilable as water and oil, and at no moment is Saint Clair allowed to remind us of the descendants of Molière's marquis the fashionables of the Boulevards, in their clothes from Staub and their fatuous ubiquity. The two *êtres d'exception*, caught in their net worthy of the antique fatality, stand out against the frivolous background, in the starkness of their misfortune. Too shadowy, you say, that intelligent, so feminine form, in spite of her uprightness and her mournful decline (for Madame de Coursy, after seeing not a soul for three years, is torn from her retreat and led away to recover at Hyères by her cousin, Julie, where, after a month or two, she dies " of a malady of the lungs caused by domestic worries, according to Doctor M. . , who looked after her "). But Saint Clair, buck of the Restoration swept into this Oresteian close, clings to the memory, for he is worthy of the theme. Perhaps no one even then, observing a figure in the street or at the Opera, would say with a start : " The very spit of Mérimée's hero ! " for, even if we remember that " he was tall and well built, with a noble and intelligent look almost always too serious, although his smile was an open one and full of charm ", his creator had destined him, with an instinctive sense of elegance, to be merged in the crowd. And yet, somehow, if in the bureau of the Ministry of the Interior,

towards the year 1832, that neat functionary, between the signing of two papers thrust under his nose by one of the hated "cads", picks up an old number of the *Revue de Paris*, is it quite a delusion to imagine that the lips, a moment ago twisted down in repugnance, suddenly smooth out into an open smile of a most pointed sympathy, excited by something in its pages? A woman, a duel. . . "Someone who did not like my prose" . . . *somme toute*, in this degenerate age, a rapier is less dangerous than a pistol. . .

## III

"Musset", says Blaze de Bury, "did not permit that anyone should talk to him of literature when he was supping joyously at the cabaret with gentlemen of his acquaintance." The *dandysme* of the 30's goes a long way to prove of how phenomenal a nature were the manifestations of Romanticism in the country, *par excellence*, of Reason. As the python engulfs its rabbit and shows for a time the bulge of the undigested meal, but before long becomes his dark and lissom self, so French literature, whenever it comes to absorb nutrition fetched from outside its natural bounds, exhibits only for a time the symptoms of indigestion, and quickly ends by transforming the import into the muscle and lifeblood of its own vigorous self.

In 1830, the dykes which up to the wars of Napoleon had protected Paris against an excessive cosmopolitanism, had burst and never been rebuilt;

and the imposing phantoms, Shakespeare, Goethe, Scott, and Byron had penetrated into the very air of the City of Pleasure, as its cafés and theatres and boulevards were overflowing with foreigners. *Hernani* is the outward and visible sign of this saturation. Mérimée, like Musset (who is, after all, anything but a drawing-room madrigalist), cannot quite rise, or rather descend, to a red waistcoat. Delacroix appears to have noticed a conscious revulsion. "Mérimée", he writes to Paul de Musset, "whom you seem to admire as I do, is simple, but he gives rather the impression of running after simplicity, out of hate for the horrible bombast of the men of the moment." And so the group of gifted revellers, to which the *chef de Cabinet* of Comte d'Argout piques himself on belonging, cultivate the attitude which Johnson commented on in his *Life of Congreve*: "There seems to be a strange affectation in authors of appearing to have done everything by chance." For it is only the very greatest of literary spirits who can afford to be bores; by the superior perfection of the result, they atone for being obsessed with their subject. The artist not only is incapable of, but adverse to the welling-over of genius, and Mérimée labels himself by this wearing of his rue with a difference.

There is, after all, a subtle pleasure in making a display of modesty for one who knows himself to be uncommonly favoured by fortune. Do not his gifts throw open for him all doors? We are even surprised to find that he passes for being also a light of politics, of liberalism, as we might, it is true, have expected. When the funeral procession of the republican General Foy moved in 1825 on its solemn way through a Paris

already ill-disposed to the Bourbons, the sculptor, David d'Angers, had observed in the group round the bier the features of " those men who uphold with most energy the interests of the nation ". Mérimée appears, in his *bas-relief*, bearing up the general's coffin on his left shoulder; the sculptor had doubtless in mind enthusiasts like Delphine Gay and Hugo, who figure also in the procession, but the trait stands. That, however, belongs by now to history; the liberal circle of Mme Aubernon has had no lasting claim on him, and besides there was too much of the *sexe fort*, and of a seriousness! Now, under the July monarchy, he can flit from Mme Ancelot and the Rue de la Rochefoucauld to Mme de Boigne or the sparkling Mme de Castellane, tasting in each a variant of intellectual pleasure, and contented to pass more than one moment leaning over an arm-chair to whisper an allusion into a soft pink ear. He frequents, for preference, those *salons* where he does not risk being caught by " rhyme-gargling " ladies, who, between a valse and a funeral march of Chopin, feel obliged to give vent to their passion for Lamartine. " *Ah, les vers de la rive gauche—quelle grêle!* " Mme Ancelot, the " Ancilla " of the scurrilous letters to Stendhal, would perhaps have been less prompt in eulogy had she come across her unflattered portrait in their pages; as it is, she rejoices to see him enter. " He knows both how to talk a mass of foreign languages, when he wants to (a faculty rare in France), and how to be silent when he should. No one shows more moderation in speech." And, looking back on these days of " youth, merriment and animation ", she remembers him as constituting

" along with Beyle, Eugène Delacroix, and the charming Baron de Mareste, the greatest attraction of my parties and those of Gérard." It is true that with, perhaps, a flash of clairvoyant revenge she has a sly dig at him, and states that all those languages, he was " schooled to them by female lips and eyes ". But she admires him all the more; he is the only rival in the matter to Tourguenev, who also is a great polyglot, and such a master of satire that Mérimée is not disinclined to sit at his feet, while waiting for the ripening of a real friendship.

So he wanders with his sharp eyes, waving hair and black romantic cravat, as Deveria's portrait shows him to us, gleaning along every furrow, piling up impressions in a mind infinitely receptive, and perhaps too quick in judgment always to judge with fairness. But the scamp bubbles up in him like vapour in a marsh. In his dissipation, he remains impregnably himself, the pupil of no one; for, as Blaze de Bury puts it, " *il avait la gauloiserie innée.*" But we must be thankful for this *gauloiserie*, in spite of the flow of scabrous anecdotes which could drive many away from him; for without it, the vision of Mérimée as a poring scholar or antiquarian becomes credible. The two counterbalance each other, the scholar's sense of exactness and proportion even in vice and the frivolous nights that shake the folio dust from the brain. The result is, if not happiness, something neither dead-alive nor repulsive. Jacquemont, Mérimée's particular friend, " the Greek stoic so full of gaiety and charm ", may be ascending the valley of Kashmir; perhaps Stendhal is detained in Rome, shaken by some fresh passion; but the family

of elect diners answers the roll. Delacroix, head over heels in love with a "very original woman, who is full of wit," finds time to foregather, at Mérimée's bidding, in one of the private rooms at the Divan or the Café de Paris, with Musset, no longer the exact replica of Chérubin, de Mareste, a cousin of Mérimée's chief (who has set the seal on his fame by a solemn dictum: "*Le mauvais gout méne au crime*"), and Horace de Viel-Castel, one man at least whose reminiscent observations prove that Mérimée did not always inspire friendship in his own circle. They will be joined by less Gallic companions; the bizarre silhouette of the adventurer Koreff, a Jewish doctor from Breslau who, by adopting the theories of Mesmer and a fervent cult for Fichte, Schelling, and Novalis, has influenced Chamisso and Hoffmann, has cured Mme de Custine's son of neurasthenia and mounted on that ladder to a reputation upheld more by awe than affection and chequered with whispers of espionage, sorcery and charlatanism; on his heels will doubtless appear the cultivated and fastidious Loeve-Weimars (yet another German!), the translator of Hoffmann, whose tales "scandalize and astound". They dine exceedingly well, for if Mérimée's talent for preparing macaroni once enchanted Victor Hugo (a treat that did not prevent Hugo from dubbing the restraint of the cook's literary style "the sobriety of a bad stomach"), Viel Castel has been known to devour quite alone for a bet a dinner worth 500 francs, and of course, the versatile Koreff is familiar with all the gourmet's wiles; they talk interminably, and they do not always end the evening in the vineyards of the Lord. Mérimée, for one, being the reverse of a

careless poet, must be at the office in the rue de Grenelle not too late in the morning, and probably keeps himself to the narration of the most appalling indecencies in that even, almost frigid, voice. . . . Musset, listening and watching, through all his amusement does not omit to note that Mérimée "may wear tight gloves and have his suits made in England, but the back of his head is that of a peasant." *In vino veritas* . . . but the pose, if it be such, has not a flaw in it, Musset owns—and what a magnificent intelligence gleams in the eyes, in spite of the drilled tones of the teller! At last, after the admirable meal, they rise and make for the boulevards; and Mérimée will find a moment next day to console Sutton Sharpe for his absence by sending to London an account of the night, how they had dropped into the Théâtre Italien to hear the divine Malibran in *Don Giovanni*, and of course at midnight kept a rendezvous with some sprightly *rats d'Opéra*. At no date in his life does Mérimée really regret these dissolute hours. For all his curiosity and his instinct for watching "the wheels go round", he could always drop his mental magnifying glass and robustly enjoy himself. In 1854, a letter to the Doctor Véron, who had been manager of the Opéra, is one of many recalling the agreeable days when he used to "shock moral folk". "About 1830, there were, in the Opera Chorus, five or six women who were not capable of the witticisms of a Sophie Arnould, but with whom one laughed to tears from the beginning to the end of a supper." So much did the spirit of Parisian revels chime in with a note in his character which has always formed an inseparable part of his outlook

on life, that he constantly and without any false bravado, but with a half-humorous *moue* revives the echo of it. "When I was young, I was not a hypocrite and . . . I snapped my fingers at the *qu'en dira-t-on*." Admiring action as he instinctively does, he cannot reprove himself severely for having given himself over in time past to that simulacrum of action which dissipation had offered to the son of a Parisian bourgeois. But for witness that the roses had sometimes had worms in their red hearts and the reek of spilled wine had now and then risen to his nostrils, listen to a birthday invitation of 1833, sent to the reprobate over the Channel: "The 28th of September, 1833, at 11 o'clock, I shall be thirty years old. You must know that my thirtieth year has been announced to me as extremely fatal by three sorceresses. And indeed, I have been and still am the prey of a whole string of woes and misfortunes, great and small. I have lost an aunt and an uncle, and Jacquemont[1]; a woman I was very fond of, and on whose love I counted absolutely, has dropped me! I have left the Ministry of Commerce for that of the Interior! In fact, I should never end if I were to make the exact count of all my tribulations. If I survive this ominous year, I shall live happily and long", and he invites Sutton Sharpe to supper for the 28th, with ladies from the Opera and other good schools of behaviour. In another note to Mme Cuvier, he quite forgets to be ironical and asserts the life he is leading to be so depressing that his good temper is much affected by it, and we have also his repeated declarations to the director of the *Revue des Deux*

[1] Jacquemont had died of fever at Bombay early in the year.

*Mondes*, that these night-bird hours unfit and discourage him for writing, that he repents of having allowed his stories to appear so precipitately in print, that they should have ripened more in his imagination. These finished gems which we are accustomed to consider as the perfection of the jeweller's art! But it is just the artist revolting against the fast liver, who in a fit of exasperation gives away the truth. "I can only bear bad frequentations at rare intervals, and that is because of an inexhaustible curiosity concerning all the varieties of the human species": and again, in a much later letter: "I look on an actress or a young lady of the rue de Bréda as I look on a *prégadiou*"[1]. Evidently such a merging of physical and aesthetic pleasure, however much it may interest a student of psychology, is not exactly designed to create happiness in its inventor. But Mérimée, questioning and fretful spirit, could not be happy for long. The penalty paid for possessing a superfluity of intelligence is always a hard one.

The loss of Jacquemont, whose letters from India were written in a natural style that Mérimée, always pruning, could not but envy, and whose nature and tastes had endeared him to the complicated young novelist, drew from Mérimée a somewhat bare and correct appreciation of his friend, in the form of an article in which we can suppose a genuine sorrow had been frozen by a horror of tears shed in public. But the gap made itself sharply felt, at the close of the year 1832, when the absence

[1] A praying mantis. Mérimée made friends with one at Cannes later in his life.

or illness of most of Mérimée's boon companions drove him again to eat Christmas roast beef in London. This expedition has not left us anything to compare with the arresting *Lettres d' Espagne* of 1830; but the visit was a second one, and English life held no surprises for one whose Anglomania dated back to his childhood. Newgate, even in the eighteenth century, would have been a pallid substitute for this; at Valencia (theyare hanging a *majo* for murder):

"Midday struck as the executioner walked up the fatal steps, dragging the victim after him, who could only mount with difficulty, for he walked backwards. The stairway is a wide one and has a baluster only on one side. The monk kept to the baluster side, while the executioner and the condemned man ascended on the other; the monk talked continually, making endless gestures. As they reached the top, while the hangsman with an extraordinary quickness passed a cord round his victim's neck, I heard them say that the monk was making him say over his Credo. Then raising his voice, he cried: 'My brothers, join your prayers to those of this poor sinner.' I heard a soft voice beside me pronounce the word 'Amen'; I turned my head, and I saw one of my pretty Valencian girls with her cheeks a little deeper pink than usual, and energetically fanning herself. She was looking fixedly in the direction of the gallows. I turned my eyes that way; the monk was re-descending the stairway, and the criminal hung in mid-air, the executioner on his shoulders, while his servant pulled him by the feet."

We think, before this juxtaposition, of one of those macabre German engravings of Dürer's time, "Death

and the Maiden". But all is grist for Mérimée's mill; it is delightful to shake Ellice's hand again and to be lodged with Sutton Sharpe. He is armed this time with a letter for Talleyrand. In a letter to Comte d'Argout, he gives vent to his admiration for the old ambassador. "An extraordinary man . . . simple and of the correctest manners . . . reigning like a tyrant", with even the haughty Lady Jersey *à plat ventre* before him . . . "*on me dit qu'il me fait des coquetteries*", he ends: "*je ne sais si cela est vrai, mais je suis tout séduit.*" Who knows? perhaps the aged Machiavel felt already how suitably this brilliant novelist would adorn the Court of a dynasty in part restored and pillared up by his own grandson[1]; and the pinch of 18th century in Mérimée's manner and composition were not, we can guess, *pour lui déplaire*. So the winter passes by, with the discovery of Lady H . . .,[2] who strikes him as typical of his own generation, "lacking in generous passions, but knowing how to reconcile with a very free way of living, an exquisite politeness", a one-sided view of the time which does not surprise us; with introductions to "Pam", Macaulay and Mme de Dino, with once again the bleeding snouts of election days ("onions, cabbage-stalks, and a dead cat were the sole weapons employed", he notes, and hears that one of Lord Ingestre's hired boxers smashed an elector of his own party). The spoilt only child, too, of the Rue des Beaux Arts, is ecstatic before the comfort of the Athenaeum Club; "a library, a cigar divan, springy sofas, deep arm-chairs"—he gloats over them. And the rest of the time is spent in "loafing, going to

[1] Morny. [2] Lady Holland.

bed at 4, rising at midday, eating venison and grouse, and picking up superb women to whom one may teach French manners." This *littérateur* does indeed rest on his laurels.

To this interlude of promiscuous gallantry belongs a *liaison* so short as hardly to merit the name, so disastrous that if we can believe a pen as often addicted to enthusiasm as to violent despair, rarely can such black disillusion, on one side at least, have followed the attempted union of two hearts. Mérimée, restored to Paris and its frivolities early in 1833, finds in the foyer of the Opera a little girl who is nodding to sleep by her mamma's side, and carries her on his shoulder to George Sand's carriage. A mother imbued with the spirit of the writer of *Emile* could not but be touched by this naturalness. He calls on her. " The power of his intellect fascinated me completely", she confessed in the summer of 1853 to Sainte Beuve. " For eight days I believed that his disdainful insouciance would cure me of my childish susceptibility." We may already have imagined the clash of the love she had dreamed of " tolerable to the senses, intoxicating to the soul ", a mirage of sensibility, against the cynicism of the worldly-wise Prosper. " *Enfin* ", she closes pitifully, " I behaved at 30 as a girl of 15 would not have done." She made other blunders, for Prosper, one morning while she was at her toilet, was turning over the notes and unfinished novels on her table, and she heard him suddenly read out " Prosper Mérimée is " . . . (this and that, more truthful than flattering), and though she rushed in all dishevelled, the harm was done. But if the occasion of the breach lay therein, the cause lay deeper. " If

Prosper Mérimée had understood me, he might have loved me; and, if he had loved me, he would have subjugated me; and, if I could have been subjugated by a man, I should have found salvation, for my liberty gnaws me away and is killing me." And the lover, in his defence: "She is a woman attracted to sensuality by a cold curiosity rather than by a bent of her nature." Rabelais and Rousseau, illusion and disillusion, the pupil of Valmont and Lélia—it is useless to linger over the hopelessness of such encounters.

But of all the costumes donned by the Romanticism of these years the socialist blouse is most repugnant to Mérimée's nature. Sainte Beuve writing on his talent in 1831, had already singled him out as being the most direct antithesis possible to Lamartine and Hugo; the "least Christian" of all the Romantic champions. The Fouriers and Considérants and Saint Simons of the approaching years will excite even more disdain in him than the unctuous *abbés* of the Restoration; he would almost prefer the Crevels and Gaudissarts of this world, devotees of the cult of King Poire.[1] And, as for allowing any of the wide-eyed, flowing-haired apostolic enthusiasms to tinge at all his literary outlook—to that notion he would in all likelihood reply with a fresh *grivoiserie*. If to the Delacroix he defines art as "*l'exagération à propos*," last half of the expression balances the first; if he follows closely (partly out of friendship, it is true) Hugo's dramatic apotheosis, and begs him to send Madame Recamier two seats for the first night of *Hernani*, he expresses only a tepid surprise at the

[1] Louis-Philippe.

" demi-fiasco " of *Marion Delorme* in 1831.[1] " People are so difficult to amuse these days ! " he agrees with Stendhal : " the heroic times are past ; people yawn or stay away." But we can be sure that it was more the success of *Hernani* as a goad to the resentment of the *bourgeois* and the fierceness of the battle that had attracted him, just as if ever he had defended *Le Roi s'Amuse* on its suppression, it would have been out of sympathy for the reason—*immoralité*. Paradox, irony. . . .

No, the bureau and the café and the chance adventure remain his chosen round. *La Double Méprise*, on its appearance in 1833, reveals only a greater depth and scope in the writer's psychological genius ; its four walls are French walls, the Opera, a salon, a country house and a coach. It is as if Mérimée, elegant spider, is shrinking further into his private corner, afraid that the clumsiness of events or the gales of controversy may sweep away his delicate web, dislodge him from his constructive balance. Like *Le Vase Etrusque*, it is all outlining, reserve and insinuation where description is concerned ; but with an incredible economy of means, he has attained to an analysis of human motives and reactions, a skill in dissecting hearts which a more modern lover of greater detail (Proust, for example, whose study of Swann's jealousy, is like a fugue on the Saint Clair motif) might be proud to claim for their own. In no work of Mérimée's does each single trait carry with it so much of its essential weight, fit so appropriately into the puzzle, form so indispensably a brick of the careful edifice.

[1] The piece had a personal interest for him in the modifications of Didier's character which Hugo had introduced on his advice.

To read the tale through is like partaking of a meal arranged by a *gourmet*; each dish is accompanied by the wine which not only brings out its flavour, but prepares the palate for its successor. Even if Mérimée sat down to write with more than ever a hate of the "horrible exaggerations that everywhere met his ear", you will find no harsh reminder of it. *The Vase Etrusque* has already shown along what a knife-edge of chance and variations a true passion takes its course; how much more, he seems to say, that far commoner affair, an *amour goût*, such as many foolish people take for the other!

And so he situates this meeting of Julie de Chaverny and Darcy at a quite arbitrary point in both their existences, plays with their half-unconscious sentiments as a cat with a ball of wool; and all this with the plainness of fashion's everyday show thrown in to give the tragedy a more subtle relief. When we think the Opera will bring us to the crucial point, we are put off with a fresh light thrown on Chaverny's vulgarity; at the juncture where we are sure Julie's heart is strongly moved, Darcy launches gaily into a jocular account of an adventure in Turkey with a *mamamouchi* and a favourite and a sack; and none of this is useless, although we are more than perplexingly led from a jest to a digression, and from the digression back by a natural path to the heart of the drama, out of it once more on to the neutral ground of Mérimée's indifference, and at last into the horrible despair of the close, which will naturally be illumined by a last mirthless, but well-bred smile of our mentor. Never has the perverse and inexplicable charm of this Sphinx

among novelists so lured us, stung us, shocked us, and as we were turning away unsatisfied, drawn us back to him with a look of perfect sincerity, that slowly fades as we watch, leaving, irrevocably, nothing.

The story's framework is simple. Julie de Chaverny, married to a worthy but stupid and self-contented husband, has reached by boredom that perhaps vulnerable condition of mind which aspirants to her good graces, like the young and agreeable officer, Chateaufort, have reason to think auspicious to them. Exasperated by a more glaring piece of tactlessness than usual on her husband's part, she is disposed to think favourably of Châteaufort; not more, but even that prepares the ground on which the seed of the news that her old acquaintance, Darcy, has returned from abroad, falls and bears instant fruit. They meet one evening; her old memories and the fresh impression made by his manners and his reputation crystallize (the Stendhalian vocabulary is not out of place) into a passion. He escorts her back to Paris from the country house where they have both been staying, and in the carriage, obeying Heaven knows what confusion of instinct, pent-up weariness and infatuation, she gives herself to him. For Darcy, the adventure has its piquancy. After leaving Julie at her door, "he re-entered his carriage and had himself driven home, whistling with the look of a man very well satisfied with his day." But Julie, virtuous at heart, finds herself in a purgatory of remorse from which there is but one exit. Wrought up with sleeplessness and torture of mind she leaves her husband's house the next day, and alone with her maid in a country inn on the road to Nice, after

an intermittent but fatal fever, she dies, her last intelligible words entrusted to the maid for Darcy ; " Write to him . . . that he does not know me . . . that I do not know him ! "

After *La Double Méprise*, there can be small doubt that the artistic gifts able to leave on the mind so strong and pitiful an impression of true tragedy, without at all pressing the point or indeed, appearing to lean to one side or the other, must be abundant indeed. In this tale, once and for all do Mérimée's affectation of Byronism, of desiring, like another writer, to be visited only as a gentleman, his off-hand pointing-out of odious injustices in fate and humanity, his shrugs and sarcasms, sink further into the background than he might himself have pretended to wish. True, that before such perfection, it is quite gratuitous, perhaps misplaced, to go examining him for signs of partiality or emotion, like inquisitors worming out heresies. But it is because we cannot see in passages like the following merely the stylist's pleasure combined with that of the psychological entomologist at this pinning and spreading of a rare specimen, that we feel ourselves entitled to accuse Mérimée of having attained greatness, as it were, in spite of himself ; and none of his cold and civil disclaimers can abolish the fact, for we may say that he has openly convicted himself, in the exercise of his craftsman's duties, of having dallied with Pity and allowed her to look on at his work. As once before, let the French speak for itself : *" Qu'on se répresente la pauvre Julie étendue sur son lit à demi habilleé, se tournant et se retournant sans cesse ; tantôt dévorée d'une chaleur brûlante, tantôt glacée par un frisson*

*pénétrant, tressaillant au moindre craquement de la boiserie et entendant distinctement les battements de son coeur. Elle ne conservait de sa position qu'une angoisse vague dont elle cherchait en vain la cause. Puis tout d'un coup le souvenir de cette fatale soirée passait dans son esprit, aussi rapide qu'un éclair, et avec lui se réveillait une douleur vive et aiguë comme celle que produirait un fer rouge dans une blessure cicatrisée.*

*Tantôt elle regardait sa lampe, observant avec une attention stupide toutes les vacillations de la flamme, jusqu'à ce que les larmes qui s'amassaient dans ses yeux, elle ne savait pas pourquoi, l'empêchassent de voir la lumière. "Pourquoi ces larmes?" se disait-elle. "Ah, je suis déshonorée!"*

*Tantôt elle comptait les glands des rideaux de son lit, mais elle n'en pouvait jamais retenir le nombre. "Quelle est donc cette folie?" pensait-elle. "Folie? Oui, car il y a une heure, je me suis donnée comme une fille à un homme que je ne connais pas."*

*Puis elle suivait d'un oeil hébété l'aiguille de sa pendule avec l'anxiété d'un condamné qui voit approcher l'heure de son supplice. Tout-à-coup la pendule sonnait. "Il y a trois heures . . ." disait elle tressaillant en sursaut, "j'étais avec lui, et je suis déshonorée!"*

And, even after all this, our literary Mephisto will have the laugh of us, chuckling that he has seized a golden opportunity to prove to us the world's *bêtise*, and pointing out how agreeable it is to pity a lady in distress. We console ourselves with the thought that no Flaubert, no Maupassant will ever touch this grace in a hard realism.[1]

[1] M. Edmond Jaloux has written a preface to *La Double Méprise* (Paris, chez Devambez, 1922) which puts all these limping commendations a great deal better.

If *La Double Méprise* by its photography of two human hearts, not only sets Mérimée for once on the level which Stendhal constantly maintained by virtue of genius and a more generous disregard of the exigencies of form and expression, but stamps him as an author who need not yet fear oblivion, since the study strikes a reader of 1926 as of a perfect modernity, *Les Ames du Purgatoire* may be held as restoring him, and by no means disgracefully, to his own time. " Cicero says somewhere (it is, I fancy, in his treatise *On the Nature of the Gods*) that there have been several Jupiters—a Jupiter in Crete—another at Olympia—another elsewhere . . . out of all these three Jupiters there has been composed a single one, to whom are attributed all the adventures of his homonyms. . . ." So, he continues, in Spain, " not only has Seville possessed a number of Don Juans, but many other towns mention their own." Nevertheless, " on a close examination it is easy to give each his due, or at least to distinguish two of these heroes, that is: Don Juan Tenorio, who, as everyone is aware, was carried off by a statue of stone, and Don Juan Maraña who met with quite another end."

History, which will one day claim Mérimée altogether, and erudition rear their heads once more; he cannot enter on the story of a figure become universally known and idolised as a model by the youth of the day without having consulted documents and compared versions. Not that at the age of 31, he has yet developed into so much of a historian as to shrink from snapping his fingers at a manuscript; for the artist in him bows before one of the greatest literary symbols of all time and he will pick and choose in the legends about

both Don Juans so as to pay a proper homage to the incarnation of recklessness and unsatisfied longing that we know. And the pains taken by the Comtesse de Montijo in 1830 to secure for him access to all the dusty sources of information, and his own frequenting of the *plus sales cochons de l'Andalousie* have not been wasted. Ostensibly, he chooses the life of Don Juan de Maraña to unroll for us. Son of noble parents, he has been brought up in the sombre Catholicism of Spain. "In the oratory of the Countess de Maraña was a picture in the hard, dry style of Morales, representing the torments of purgatory. All the kinds of punishments that the painter had been able to call up were depicted in it with such exactness that the torturer of the Inquisition could have found no fault with it." The child shudders in fascination before the man whose entrails are being devoured by a serpent while he is suspended over a burning brasier by means of iron hooks fixed in his sides. The Cid, the Moorish revolts, the tradition of chivalry and rigid honour form the background of his mind as he sets out for the University of Salamanca. Here he becomes a prey to the diabolical proselytizing of the rake, Don Garcia Navarro; and step by step, he descends the slope of seductions, duels[1] and riotousness until he murders the father of one of his loves and is compelled to leave the country with Don Garcia and make for the wars in Flanders.

While they are helping the company of Captain Manuel Gomare to "kill heretics", Don Garcia is mortally wounded and expires in an impenitent atheism: "One thing annoys me, to think

[1] The incident of the serenade interrupted by a duel occurred in the life of Cervantes himself.

that after my death, the monks will persuade you that it was a judgment of God. You will agree with me that there is nothing more natural than that a soldier be killed by a shot from an arquebus." The news of his parents' death recalls Don Juan from the roystering life he has resumed, to Seville. There a short illness leaves him a moment to look over his list of conquests (headed by one of the Pope's mistresses), and he finds to his dismay that, as a friend points out to him, there is one husband he has not yet made miserable, "God". So with an endless battery of vows and pleadings and notes and cunning, he prepares the abduction from a convent of Teresa, an old victim of his who has become a nun. As he is waiting in a deserted street of Seville for the hour of her arrival to strike, he hears approaching "a mournful and solemn music". Before long, a procession rounds the corner of the street and comes towards him. "Two long files of penitents bearing lighted tapers marched before a bier covered with black velvet and borne by a number of figures dressed after an ancient style, with white beards and swords at their sides. . . . All this convoy moved forward slowly and with gravity. Their steps made no sound on the paving stones and it was as if each one of them glided rather than walked along. The long stiff folds of the vestments and cloaks seemed as motionless as the marble clothing of statues. . . ." The solitary onlooker, overcoming the disgust inspired in a voluptuary by the idea of death, stops one of the dark figures and asks him politely who is the person they are burying. The penitent, raising a face "pale and fleshless like

that of a man who has come out of a long and painful illness", answers sepulchrally: "It is Count Don Juan de Maraña."

All this elaborate conspiracy to inspire terror may by now be impotent to strike a responsive chord in us; but it is beautifully, consummately built up; the style has all the spareness we are accustomed to expect, the details chosen are impeccably fitted in. Don Juan follows the company into the church, and after a frightful vision of his soul being disputed by the earnest prayers of the penitents and the spectre of Don Garcia, behind whose head rises "a gigantic serpent" (who can now preach the novelty of the cult of unconscious memories?), falls down in a fit, and on reviving converts himself and becomes a monk. Teresa, whose old passion has been inflamed, dies murmuring "He never loved me!"; and the great Libertine, after a repentance accompanied by all the most abject mortifications gives the lie to the vision by being buried, in the odour of sanctity, near the high altar of the chapel he had founded. On his tomb, together with a legend celebrating his virtues, were engraved the words: "*Aqui jace el peor hombre que fué en el mundo.*"[1] And thus we come back to earth, after this superb evocation of a hero of vice, with the plain accents of history itself; for as Mérimée has been careful to point out, all visitors to Seville will have been shown the tomb in the Church of Charity, and can bear out his statement.

Spain was always, for Mérimée, the happiest of hunting grounds. He seems to have understood and been invincibly drawn to the blend of gorgeousness and

[1] "Here lies the worst man in the world."

dirt, of passion and courtesy, of an ascetic piety and love of blood that has not ceased to erect a barrier between the Spaniard and the rest of Europe. As a counterblast to *Hernani*, this highly-coloured tale must have made its mark; side by side with Musset's *Contes d'Espagne* and Gautier's *Voyage* they afford a strange contrast in the imprints left by the country of the Conquistadors on French intellects. Mérimée, "*qui aime le vrai, et l'aime de coeur*", disdains all romantic embroideries; his own romanticism, that which picks out with delight the terrible ardour of religion beyond the Pyrenees and its spectacular domination, and forgets to mock before this emaciated mysticism, contents him in his aloofness. Perhaps it is the paucity of romanesque and Mérimée's unwillingness to cling to the legend that sends Don Juan straight into hell-fire by the Mozartian trap-door, which is responsible for the obscurity that still envelops this admirable fresco.

Such, then, is the "literary baggage" as the French papers have it, of the fashionable young secretary, who in the late summer of 1834, writes to Sutton Sharpe: "I write to you in front of my packed trunk, an hour before installing myself in the mail-coach for Nevers." For after a moment's anxiety concerning the ministerial General Post of the preceding April, Mérimée had slipped gracefully out of the radius of the fallen Comte d'Argout and by the timely agency of Thiers into a post which would gratify his moderate ambition, prevent him from fretting over empty pockets, and give full opening not only to his erudition, but to his perpetual inquisitiveness concerning the oddities of the human race. "He offers me, and I have

accepted, the place of Inspector-General of Historical Monuments, held till now by Vitet. . . . It suits excellently my tastes, my laziness, and my projects of travel. So, you see, everything is for the best in this best of worlds." He might well preen himself. To his latest hour, the official world always found him an advantageous corner; this one admitted him to the enclosure, the later sinecures to the Grand Stand of the life he loved to observe. His rare precocity, his early and ineradicable habit of accepting no evidence at second hand, both in pleasure and pain, permitted him to set out for these tours of inspection without the hope of changing his opinion of life or his principles of art. All that his maturity will add to *Carmen* and *Colomba* is length, but the 200 pages to which a real initiation into Corsican life inspired him in 1840, if they testify to more breadth, that is, a greater easiness in the telling than *Mateo Falcone*, show in no way that his own horizons have expanded, or that any variant has crept into his firm beliefs.

As his acquaintance with the world grew, his somewhat disdainful tolerance, that of a man who expects nothing of humanity because it is a blind mass of imperfections did not diminish; "*le monde est bête*", that was his motto, and it changed no more than the inscription on Don Juan's grave. But his sharply limited view of the cosmos set the bounds also to his art, and set them quickly and irreparably, so that even if his later years had been stirred up by some tremendous revelation, spiritual or mental, he would soon have put order in the turmoil by reasoning away the phenomenon in the old, cold, resigned, scornful manner. Inaccessible to doubt or dream, he

judges always and all things with the swiftness of Orso della Rebbia raising his gun to fire, or Don José's knife; that infinitely fine aesthetic machine registers his appreciation and turns out a finished comment with a rapidity never clogged by an afterthought or a whimsical hitch. Mystery, for him, means either coquetry or pose, and there comes an instant when, like Darcy complaining of the unvarying blue vault of the East, we would give all the flashing wit and cruelty of these stories, all their lithe elegance, for an ounce of humour, of that spirit which softens at the sight of the imperfect or the grotesque and justifies Pascal's definition of man's true greatness.

But *Les Ames du Purgatoire* must have seemed an ideal farewell to the lucky functionary busying himself with his official departure. On such a gesture, without undue ostentation, but having incisively said one's word, could one take leave of the "family" of the Café Anglais and the Rotonde, bow over white hand after white hand in the salons of the Chaussée d'Antin, just find time to salute the advent of Mlle. Brohan to the Théâtre Français, and rumble away to Nevers. The parting shots are full of the usual drollery. He recommends an acquaintance to Sutton Sharpe, *une excellente amie*, whom he cannot alas! take South with him, just as Don Garcia passed on a mistress or two to his pupil in debauch; he assures him, at the same time, that he will find the group at the Café Anglais in fine fettle "except for Royer-Collard, who is in love and refuses to eat, while Beyle has irritated his Minister considerably of late, by adding at the close of a letter written to present a *chancelier*; "He is, I may

remark, a totally incompetent person." Au revoir, then to the practical jokes of midnight, the young ladies of the Rue de Bréda, the banquets and the literature, all of which were beginning to inflict on the palate more than a suspicion of dust and ashes. Only the intimates of this "tall, slim man" boarding the mail-coach, "with his wide forehead, quizzical smile and direct eyes", who will sit, as well as the jolting on the Nevers road will permit, "stiff and reserved, buttoned up to the neck, on the defensive, like an English gentleman,"[1] could guess that he is to turn out, in spite of his obscene stories and his enigmatic calm, one of the most devoted servants imaginable to the preservation of France's heritage of art.

## IV

The spectacle of the coddled Parisian, as he presents it himself in his letters, receiving the buffets of provincial discomfort on this reverse of a sentimental journey, would have awoken a mingled pity and contempt in the mind of such stately travellers as, for example, the great Lord Byron himself, had he passed him in the inn-passage or on the road. Mérimée's letters are eloquent. "I reached Autun to-day in a waggonette drawn by two galloping horses, whose wheels ran over a goose as it entered the town. The vehicle is a bone-shaker, almost without any back to it; every prominent stone sent me

[1] A. de Pontmartin, *Le Correspondant*, January, 1874.

jumping two feet into the air. I have covered twenty leagues to-day and changed carriages seven times. . . . I am bruised and battered to pieces. . . ." This to Royer-Collard in August of 1834, when the first of his tours is only at its outset. From Mâcon, the cry goes up again. " I am overcome with fatigue, for I am conscientious over my job, moving about by night and in the daytime clambering about old hovels." A compensation shines here and there; he hits on important manuscripts, caked with the dust of provincial libraries, or, more satisfying yet, dines with the superior of a Trappist order, and, softened by the feast, revolves in his ironical mind the thought of having himself accepted as a novice,— " Only there is this infernal belief in God which I can never swallow." One day brings a minute of real aesthetic delight; at Vienne, they have unearthed a Venus, which if not of the best period, is nevertheless of an unusual plastic beauty; at Avignon, the mournful discovery of the condition of the frescoes in the Palace of the Popes is momentarily forgotten at the sight of the Avignonnaises: " Women of five feet four inches, straight as sword-blades, clean, with no wrinkles in their stockings, and shoes of stuff ". But on the whole, the weariness dominates; the mirage of the boulevard rises in the desert. " I have a feeling you will find me devilish stupid on my return; I shall greatly need to be soaked once more in the tea (!) of the Café Anglais. Really, the life I lead is more than exhausting."

And yet we feel and know that he is in his element. For the true scholar and antiquarian at his work, (especially if there is more than a little of the dilettante

in his composition) cannot fail to revel in the exercise of his divinatory faculties on dumb wood and stone. *They* cannot break into revolutions, or be moved abruptly to commit *bêtises* and errors of taste; *their* imperfections are touching, *their* mysteriousness absorbs. All Mérimée's sarcasm and exasperations are reserved for the blundering humanity round the carved and sculpted remains, the ninnies who "drag him to look at a fox's hole" or "make him scrape his hindquarters sore on a wretched hack, on the way to look at a *Syriac* inscription". But we have only to read one or two of his official reports, (his "*torche-culs*" as he calls them irreverently), to become aware that the obscurest tomb, the most primitive piece of stone-work has its allotted comment, never contemptuous or hurried. "If Victor Hugo had not written *Notre Dame de Paris* and if Mérimée had not brought about the founding of the Commission for Historical Monuments, all our old buildings would have been levelled to the ground, and Madeleines and Bourses set up in their place." Such is the testimony of a French writer on the Romantic Age.[1] The Gothic Cathedral, in the mind of the bourgeois of 1830, still formed part of the essential scene in which *sylphides*, *lutins*, *vampires*, and unfrocked monks performed the unholiest (and vaguest) of rites. The revival of Catholicism under the Restoration had recalled only the Jesuit and his mundane confessional, the tradition of a Church to enter which is but to pass from one rococo salon to another. So, throughout the country, when the local zeal had not either in a fit of religious

[1] Burty, "*L'Age du Romantisme.*"

frenzy, decided that a statue of the 13th century was pagan, and chopped off its nose, or, on the sudden anti-clerical wave of a fresh revolution, swept away its head altogether, there always remained the municipal council who, to abolish the stumbling block, would decide to pass a coat of distemper over the statue, the church, the woodwork inside, and even the tower or steeple, if the money did not always give out just when the good work was in splendid progress. "I know a prefect", Mérimée writes, "who passes for being a man of taste, and chooses himself the tint (of distemper) to be applied."

It will come as a surprise to no one that his revolt against this vandalism was not set on foot by any responsive thrill at the memory of that remote and sonorous voice crying in the Romantic wilderness: "*Pharamond, Pharamond, nous avons combattu avec l'épée!*" We must, besides, wait till 1840 to find Thierry's *Récits des Temps Mérovingiens* casting a long searchlight on the ages which the devotees of the classical had left in their merited darkness. As for *Notre Dame de Paris*, Mérimée probably ploughed through it with much the same unwillingness as, many years later, he will attempt to penetrate into *Les Misérables*, in which he will find "not a moment of naturalness." Not for him inspiring meditations before the Gothic disorder on the million offerings to heaven, the soaring flight of supplicant spires, the soul of each workman in each statue. If he could have made this effort of imagination, his reason would quickly have brought him to earth with the individualist reminder that the impression a work of art evokes varies with the man, with that man's succeeding ages, with his mood, with

his unconscious nature. His system of criticism, if it is essentially logical, has, nevertheless, the suppleness of one who has reason to be influenced by no contemporary school, since he has frequented them all. What more glacially correct than the portraiture of Gérard, penetrated with the 'Caesarism' of the Napoleonic years and consecrated to the heroic? What more fierce and challenging than the tempestuous reds and whites and sepias of Delacroix, the free vigour of David d'Angers? Mérimée, by his incorruptible love of the true, the real, and his solid base of knowledge, is not to be deterred by the vanished prestige of the Gothic. He cannot praise the confusion, for he is no poet, but he is forthcoming with a whole array of reasons, excuses, explanations, for he is an antiquarian. In literature, he could tentatively play with each new infatuation, pick a flower here and there to see how it would look in his own buttonhole; but the Past is for him the territory of certitudes, and there are few who possess a more elaborate mental catalogue of them. So, whether the relic be Gothic, Byzantine, Celtic, Greek or Romanesque, away with the evocations of dream; each edifice has its own *raison d'être*, its date, its site, its proportions, dictated by laws known to its builders, its variations from the class to which it belongs, the light that bathes it, the proportions of its ornament to its height, of its height to its surroundings. For him out of the primitive Byzantine arch is evolved the Romanesque, out of this new modification the more adventurous but mistaken Gothic; the inelegance of the countless flying buttresses that support the erection is not, for him,

compensated by the increase of light and gracefulness of the interior. This is esoteric criticism with a vengeance, the application of laws of proportion unimaginable for a time which looked on its Bourses and Madeleines and found that apart from the column and the architrave, there was no salvation. But Mérimée's reasoned justification for these immense caskets of stone with their adorable filigree work, whatever its narrowness, saved from the demolisher's pick many a treasure that the passionate cult, say, of a Michelet could not have rescued.

So he struggles, then, through the sleepy backwaters of the country, over the grim cobbles, sore and more disabused than ever, but tending the inner flame of a rare archaeological fervour. It is not only the succulent fare of Dr Cauvières' table at Marseilles, or the agreeable colloquies with another medical man, Dr Requien of Avignon[1] which console the bachelor for being shaken out of his sedentary ways; for the day following, there will always be a dreary municipal banquet, at which they will implore him "to leave a sublime thought in an album—I obey trembling with emotion". The perpetual hope of unearthing a fresh marvel, among all the montrosities, cheers him more than he will acknowledge. Whenever the two, friendship and work, can be combined, that is, of course, the ideal; and when he returns in December to Paris "frozen, weak and dropping with tiredness", he can warm himself slightly with the thought of that walk to the Fountain of Vaucluse with Requien and

[1] The two became fast friends, and Mérimée could give his conversational liberties full rein, as his carefully-guarded letters to Requien in the Musée Calvet at Avignon attest; no publisher has yet dared to publish an expurgated version of them: the volume would be too slender—or too uncharacteristic.

Fauriel, or that sunny afternoon at the old castle of Saint Honorat, when Fauriel and he had agreed that the range of the Esterel must surely be one of the loveliest hill profiles in the world.

The spring of 1835 finds him in England, returned from examining the tomb at Fontevrault which purported to contain "the bones of Richard Coeur de Lion and several of his relations, and which turned out a *véritable humbug* (*sic*)". It is diverting to find Mérimée visiting London in much the same spirit, but more wideawake and aware, as an Englishman now visits Paris. "Women white as swans, soft as satin, age, as a rule, 17." The notebook of Don Juan is taken up again! But the dilettante resumes: "Radicalism is firmly installed in this country. . . I see nothing but countesses and *ladies* asking themselves how they will live when the revolution comes. . . . The other day, I was present at a Radical meeting for the formation of a national league against the Conservatives. It is the Jacobins all over again; the prime movers are all very well off, many are nobles, eldest sons, etc." And when he has dashed off a *gourmet's* note—"Pineapples excellent, better than in Paris or at Malaga: roast beef delicious"—he puts in as an afterthought: "They say that William the Fourth is going mad. A few months ago, he had the horse-guards at Windsor paraded and drawn up in battle order, and commanded them to charge the castle and to cut down all its inhabitants with the sword, except the Queen and her first lady of the bedchamber. He is also absent-minded more often than not; for six months no one has seen him laugh. He speaks very rudely to his ministers."

All this in a letter; even so, we can figure the calm face and the monotonous voice giving an equal value to these diverse appreciations.

But the last half of the year is spent in the country where since "the beginning of the century, the Middle Ages and even the Renaissance passed for being epochs of barbarism" and "where people were shown at the Artillery Museum a sixteenth century cuirass as being the armour of Roland."[1] His duties send him to Brittany, where, although the grey antiquity of the remote Celtic wastes impresses him, his tour is altogether ruined by his acrimonious passage-of-arms with certain local authorities, who accuse him of making away with a manuscript of great age, treating (so they allege) of their patron saint's life. Mérimée, who thought he had reason to suspect certain pupils of the school of archaeology, the Ecole des Chartes, never forgave either accusers or culprits. "These savages! . . . I have revenged myself on these Breton wretches by treating them as they deserve in my report. . ." The incident would be merely humorous, were it not that it rankled in the Inspector's mind, and left him with a permanent grudge against officialdom whenever he found himself on the same archaeological field, and inspired him some years after to the defence of a rogue as real as these had, perhaps, been imaginary. The following year brought relief from persecutions in the shape of an expedition to the Eastern provinces. At Strasburg, an architect of the town salved his wounded vanity by being all admiration, not only before his "simplicity" as a man, but before his intimate knowledge of whatever

[1] Article on Du Sommerard.

subject was set before him. "Mérimée feels and lives in sympathy with the carved stone"; so the architect wrote afterwards, and his attitude must have been in keeping with the eulogy. But Mérimée's "conscientiousness" suffered no abatement, whether humanity smiled on him or showed itself *bête*. Alone in his erudite glory, he covered the necessary miles ("Cursed and three times cursed be he who invented the meter and the kilometer!"), and his poring work carries him through till dark. "Nothing is more melancholy than my life of the evening, nothing more busy than my life of the day." He must have been glad to push even further and lose 120 francs gambling at Wiesbaden, win it back at Aix-la-Chapelle, and return home, even if the homecoming was overshadowed by the death of his father; a parent who stood in no way in default before this successful son, save for the heredity passed to him of a certain inability to conceive an *au-delà*, and for that he can hardly be held responsible.

The pamphlet[1] published by Mérimée concerning his round of inspection in 1837 cannot very well hold us, unless we are architects, except by its impeccable accuracy and care for detail. From Bourges to Montluçon, from Limoges to Le Puy and down to Villefranche he wanders with a seeming capriciousness; but his reports are regular, the lucid accounts of each fresh distempering, of the disorder of the museums in the little towns, each of which with a little pains could become a legible commentary on the town's history, for he is altogether against the transportation of relics to Paris. What is more significant is the

[1] "Notes sur un voyage dans le Midi de la France."

proof that what he calls somewhere "the happy time in which he wrote interminable tales" does not yet belong to the nostalgic past. *La Vénus d'Ille* (1837) is enveloped in a quite charming aura of learning, such as a pretty subscriber to the review could pass off on her friends as being lately acquired. Every day, Mérimée must have dismounted from his carriage or his horse to shake the hand of a M. Peyrehorade, the little old Provençal who has dug up a marvellous bronze Venus, with big white eyes that stare men out. . . . M. Peyrehorade has his own notions of what the half-effaced inscription on the pedestal means. "VENERI TURBUL. . . Listen to me. A league from here, at the foot of the mountain there is a village called Boulternère. The name is a corruption of the Latin TURBULNERA", and not all his interlocutors' suggestions of TURBULENTA, "Venus the Disturber, the Unruly", will drive from the old gentleman's head the certainty that Phoenician and Greek and Heaven knows what else once made up the mutilated word. Mérimée must have been enchanted to have rapped the pompous Scaligers of the provinces over the knuckles.

But this, as usual, is part of his trick for setting in relief the stark terror of the tale. For the havoc wrought by the statue in the household of M. Peyrehorade is that celebrated time and again in the hoary legend, the legend of the "Ring given to Venus".[1] Alphonse, the son of the house and a great champion at the *jeu de paume* so popular in the country under the Canigou, is engaged to

[1] Thomas Moore's *The Ring*, "Le Varlet qui se maria à Notre Dame" of Gautier de Coinsi, a Xth Century Manuscript mentioned by Villemain in his *Vie de Gregoire VII*—these are a few of the variants of a superstition that has been traced even as far as Abyssinia.

be married to the daughter of a neighbour. On the morning of the festal day, the bridegroom cannot resist joining in a game which he finds being sharply contested between the Illois and some Aragonese players. Hampered by a diamond ring he is wearing, which is to adorn his bride's finger, he tears it off and hurriedly slips it on a finger of the Venus nearby. The marriage feast is the occasion of a great carousal and of much provincial facetiousness; the bridegroom himself, after having emptied more than one bottle of Collioure wine, blows the winy announcement into the writer's face that he is very uneasy, because the Venus has crooked her finger over the ring and he cannot remove it, all of which merely inspires the listener with disgust at his condition and a philosophical pity for tender virgins left at the mercy of such bridegrooms. And then, next morning, the house is all in a turmoil, the bride in convulsions . . . "I approached the bed and lifted up the body of the wretched young man; he was already stiff and cold. His clenched teeth and blackened visage testified to the most appalling emotions; it was sufficiently clear that his death had been violent and his agony a frightful one. Not a trace of blood, however, on his clothes. I pulled aside his shirt and saw on his chest a great livid mark that stretched round his ribs and his back. It was as if he had been crushed by a circle of iron. My foot met something hard that was lying on the carpet; I bent down and saw that it was the diamond ring. "The vengeance, of course", say the family; they remember the Spaniard who had left the *jeu de paume* smarting from his defeat and the arrogance of the victor.

Mérimée, it is not easy to see why, considered *La Vénus d'Ille* as the most successful of his stories. It is true that it belongs to the prime of his story-telling years, when he had mastered his method, and could dose to a grain the value of each sentence, each line in the piling-up of his effects; and if we grant that the enterprise was worth undertaking, then we must admit the execution to be faultless, infinitely superior, for example, to that of *Lokis*, which is built round just such another horror. There is an absence in it, too, of the particular sneering at the injustices of life which he had cultivated hitherto; there is no moral to be drawn from *La Venus d'Ille*, not even a pessimistic one; we can only perceive a certain harping on the vision that pursued him of his cruel, cat-like ideal, the same face that his pencil would draw on the margin of his papers, in a moment of distraction during the sessions of the Academy or while listening to an official harangue. "All the traits were slightly contracted; the eyes a little oblique, the mouth with upturned corners, the nostrils distended a little. Disdain, irony, cruelty, were to be read on this face, which was, none the less, of an incredible beauty." *Veneres turbulentae* . . . Carmen, Diane de Turgis, Colomba, are you not all the strange projections on to the screen of time thrown by this cold positive traveller, real and yet inhuman, figurations of his obscure desires, denizens of his pagan dream-world whom he must clothe with flesh in his eternal distaste for phantoms?

As for Mérimée's satisfaction with this "horrific" tale, we may, after all, attribute it to a fresh burgeoning of vitality in him, arising not only from the

continual movement of these absorbing tours, but, as a letter of 1836 informs us, from a new acquisition. Whether or no the lady of whom he is *grandement et gravement amoureux* is the same as the one possessing the " 36 physical qualities recommended by Brantôme and moral advantages which that villain could not appreciate ", and who draws from him the sighs ; " I am so stupid when I am in love that I ought really to study mathematics, as Rousseau's Venetian woman said ", it is neither possible nor polite to discover. *Forse che si*—in which case " Colomba," the most satisfying of his novels, if not the most arresting, and the exhilaration of these crowded years round 1840 are suitably explained. " Were it not for the vermin, which are ubiquitous, Corsica would be a delightful country." But what matter how tormented the skin when the *maquis* is all heat and perfume, when there are Romanesque churches at every turn, when one can fall in love with Catherine Bartoli, and feel tempted to marry her (certainly ; a traveller's heart cannot be expected to remain fettered at home !). For Colomba Bartoli was resigned to her mournful old age when Mérimée found her at Fozzano in the summer of 1859. But the fascination of this Electra of the brown cheeks had not diminished ; in those sombre eyes among the wrinkles, the fire of resentment glowed under the ashes of years.[1] Mérimée has situated at Pietranera the drama of Colomba's patient and subtle drilling

[1] The whole truth of Mérimée's visit to the sister of the *commandant* Orso Carabelli, whom he had known in Paris, her marriage, the vendetta between her family and that of the Durazzo and the death of her son, François, is told in *La Vraie Colomba*, by M. Lorenzo di Bradi (Flammarion, 1922).

of her brother Orso della Rebbia's mind to the imperative revenge; for, as he wrote not long after the novel's appearance, he feared to transcribe the literal succession of blow given and blow received and the real scene of action, on account of the *offensionem gentium*; not only might the actual bitterness of the feud have been sharpened, but, had there been a slip in the account, the amiable Corsican, who was in future years to offer Mérimée his "services" when the novelist had come into collision with justice, might have saved him from prison by a stiletto in the writer's own side! As it was, not only the novel itself, but the memory of its author's enraptured picnics in the *maquis* with Colomba, her relations, and a few choice outlaws, his zealous rides up and down the overgrown tracks of the island in search of crumbling antiquities, his facility with the language (as with any other he chose to take up) endeared him permanently to the islanders; and if other testimony were lacking, there are the letters of Colomba herself, written in 1858 to her influential friend, begging him to receive her son-in-law, Istria, and that of Colomba's daughter, Catherine, concerned in 1869 about an examination her son must pass and asking the distinguished Senator at whose side she might have been received at Compiègne, if by chance he knows any of the examiners who are to go round the island!

It is late in the day to attempt a fresh criticism of the book. For pure tale-telling, in the even, polished style which Mérimée alone of his contemporaries had achieved and cared to maintain, it must stand as a masterpiece; neither history nor erudition, his two tyrannical guides, have here had their say,

except in the ' local colour ', by now merged into the story itself and no longer caked on with a modishness tempered by cynicism. The incidental figures are drawn with sympathy and the habitual wit; the pleasant and simple Englishman, his pink-and-white daughter with her inoffensive posing, her sketch-book and her view of life through the prism of Byron's works; Orso della Rebbia himself, whose re-dyeing in the blood-tint of a country he had almost forgotten, his reversion to type, in fact, is traced with infinite care; Brando Savelli, the theologian brigand, who quotes Virgil—they move all so naturally through the adventurous landscape that they may be taken for as much part of the background to Colomba's amazonian hardness as the brushwood itself. That she is superb, and that even if the mercilessness of Corsican life were to soften to-morrow into a civilised decadence, she would stand, in her granite loveliness, as a living challenge to Christian sentiments, no longer needs establishing. Carmen, the tzigane, one visage only of Spain, is wayward even in her brutality, a woman and a woman apart; but as Jeanne d'Arc is France, so Colomba is Corsica; and Mérimée in his quest for the essential outlaw had not to go hunting in fifth-rate inns and at street corners; the tutelary goddess herself moved down to him, gave him her hand, and said " It is I ".[1]

1840, Mérimée's prime and his year of wonders. . . .

[1] Those who are struck with the *ballata* of Colomba: " *Il me faut la main qui a tiré, l'oeil qui a visé, le coeur qui a pensé* " will be amused to hear that Mérimée, just before leaving the island, wished to carry away an impression of a real *vocero*, and as no one had recently died, himself played the dead man and lay in the coffin. The mournfulness and gloom of the scene affected him so profoundly that he vowed he could not for love or money do it again.

Off goes once more the unwearied Inspector General, scouring Touraine and Poitou, egged on by a new zest for the work, after pulling so brilliant a wild-flower from a rude soil; even Stendhal must be envious! The stones to be built up, the crumbling signs to be read seem to him to multiply yearly. "All the monuments in the Vienne department", he cries out at Poitiers, "seem to have passed the word round and fallen down or to be threatened with decay in my presence." The country fills him with despair, for not a church but enchants his eye; over that of Saint Savin, he will wax eloquent to the extent of a huge report, 160 pages to reinstate the forgotten beauty. The simplicity of the traditions appeals to him; in his severe historical way, he tells of Sainte Guiterie, who "carried her head along in her hand without flinching", or of the woman who was carrying a stone in her apron across the field round Dax and met God, to whom she spoke a little too pertly, for the stone became in a second so heavy that she was obliged to drop it, and became the menhir that all can see. From the Landes and its cows southward to the bulls of Madrid, is a journey the shorter for being not a new one; only, in 1840, Mme. de Montijo's time is taken up with watching the fluctuations of power, and listening to the shots in the street. In the intervals, she puts her wide culture at the service of the budding historian, and while he is planning a work on Don Pedro, the 14th century Portuguese king, she sows the seeds of a doctrine ever dear to Mérimée, that of the intelligent tyrant. Mérimée, to light up his leisures, after remarking that Eugenia is fast growing into a beauty, runs off in the evening and is

entertained by the Romany, who are even more amazed than the Corsicans, for he talks to them in their own tongue, till the delighted murmur "*Es de nostres*" goes round the assembly. Then back to Paris, where he finds a political and moral confusion almost as distressing as the revolution he has just witnessed in Spain, with the Treaty of London considered as a direct insult to France, a ring of forts being constructed round the city, and Thiers vainly trying to persuade Louis-Phillipe to mobilize 500,000 men to wash out the stain on French honour.

Nothing moved by these warlike manifestations, he makes a lightning trip to London, to grub for a book on the obsessing Don Pedro. And soon over this apparently fortuitous playing with the enjoyment of the hour, looms the shadow of the *Habit Vert.* Mérimée's coquetting with the Academy is as wily and tortuous as his underground burrowings into history. For in 1841 there appears suddenly *La Guerre Sociale*, the first volume of that Life of Caesar on which he expended such prolonged efforts, putting himself on anchorite's diet and burning much midnight oil, until the caprice of an Imperial rival, himself a potential Caesar, demanded of him to lay the long-stored-up knowledge with a graceful gesture of homage at his feet. But, for the moment all we perceive is the unsuspected ballast to the flight represented by *Colomba*, and the invasion, perhaps, of the already narrow ground of his inventive faculties by his archæological habits. Over and over again, he disculpates himself, and we cannot but believe him of running after honours, of "attaching importance to a bit of ribbon". And there is this, for instance, in after years when he belonged to

more than one: "One must never say harsh things about Academies, but on the other hand, one must not value oneself a halfpenny the less if one is not privileged to be a member of them". But, really, his private opinion of himself and his achievements does not weigh in the matter; rather is it a certain horror of the void which drives him instinctively, while the volcano seems to be rumbling round him, to seek any shelter that offers itself against the wrath to come. The Academies, he must have felt, would outlive many upheavals, for in a country where intelligence is respected, because each man has a share of it, its cult would be the last to be swept away; and besides all this, his private purse was never an overloaded one, and the official shelter meant not only a vantage point from which to peer at the world, but protection against the Herculean labour of a Balzac.

But there is, besides, no doubt that the vein of gold is giving out, in spite of the renewed richness of these years, for *Carmen* will indeed be a last solid patch of the red metal; *Arsène Guillot* and *L'Abbé Aubain* are but nuggets rayed with a few pure streaks. He falls back on the plain silver of history, easier of exploitation, though all its amassed pile will never bring him the riches of those early *contes à dormir debout*. What he really thought of them, is, as so often, obscured by his silences and his joking; but when the historical excavations which have cleared the way to the Institute begin to give him aches in the shoulders, he will sigh for his inventive days that had sometimes seemed to him mere trifling, he will regret now and then the impulse which, as Filon has said, urges, at some time in their lives, those who

have earned popularity with a literary form which passes for being frivolous to add to their reputation by being wearisome in one which is considered as serious.

But before going the round of obsequious calls and making his bows to the Academicians, Mérimée sets a wide breathing-space, as if to retreat for a fresh leap. He moves first as far as Naples, where he basks and amuses himself in the low quarter of Chiaia, and then, in the autumn of 1841, joins Ampère and Lenormant for a long-contemplated journey through Greece and Asia Minor. On the way from Lamia ("the worst place in the world"), to Thermopylae, Lenormant meets with a strange accident, which must have made the writer of *La Venus d'Ille* smile to himself. They were leading their horses down the side of a ravine,when they saw running along the opposite ridge a man in a big white cloak, with a long gun, and a dead doe hanging from his shoulder. "I asked him if he would sell us the animal, but he answered: 'I want to eat it with my friends—*tous filous mou.*' This word *filous*[1] made me laugh, for the man looked a very doubtful character. As I was remounting my horse, M. Lenormant asked me what I thought of this man. I answered him that he had every appearance of being Samiel, the wild hunter. 'No', he said, 'I think it is the Devil.' 'Very probably', I answered, and I rode on ahead with Ampère. After a minute, surprised not to hear the sound of the horses behind us, I turned round and saw M. Lenormant on the ground; his shoulder was put out. We were miles from any help; so we carried him as we could to a village, and two days went by before we could find a

[1] *Filous*, in French, "sharpers, thieves."

doctor. During these two days he was left virtually alone, and later he revealed that he had spent the time in thinking things over, and had been converted." Not a comment, of course; but we imagine the shrug.

At Thermopylae, his disappointment on finding a field of beetroot in the place of the sea that had closed one end of the pass, and in the place of the stone lion set up by the Spartans, a group of Greek police in leather helmets, is tempered by the joy of hearing the crackle of the autumn leaves beneath his feet, and remembering that the noise once warned Leonidas of the Persian approach. But this pinch of the romanesque suffices; in a second he comes out with an observation of perfect justice, to the effect that Leonidas did well "to die like a hero; let those who can picture to themselves his return to Sparta, announcing that he had left in the hands of the Barbarians the keys of Greece." From the country that he calls "the cameo *par excellence*", the epitome of all he holds dear in art, he moves on with Ampère to Asia Minor, offering the laconic suggestion that Greece would be perfect were it not for "our great enemies, the fleas, which surely his Hellenic Majesty might have banished from his realm." Armed with a Turkish passport, in which the Oriental imagery of a gendarme described him as the possessor of "a lion's eyes and a ringdove's hair" (perhaps Mérimée's new and fearful moustaches took on this semblance in that fervid imagination), he went first to Smyrna and from there to Ephesus, whose architecture he rapidly summed up as being the outcome "of Greek artists adapting themselves in their work to the taste of Romans", while the lyrical

Ampère gave himself over to rapturous descriptions. After being attacked by wild dogs on the site of the citadel at Sardis, approaching perilously near a Tartar camp to seek shelter for a night, and bathing in the Pactolus (for the humble purpose of cleansing themselves), poet and archaeologist set off homewards. A period of quarantine at Malta was beguiled by "writing long letters and commenting Rabelais"; and after spending a few days in Rome, where the abundance of things to see set even Mérimée's head in a whirl (to say nothing of a queer letter out of the blue from Chateaubriand, weighted with a grandiose but obscure compliment, in which the names Colomba and Catiline were intermingled), the two wandered back to Paris, where Mérimée soon began, this time in good earnest, his "game of chess" with the Académie des Inscriptions.

For it had been the last time he would stray so far afield; those five months of 1841 in which his minister had given him "the key of the fields" left him always with a delighted souvenir of shifting lights and colours; the incomparable Doric of the Parthenon, the Sultan at Constantinople in his shiny top-boots or caked with diamonds, the lovely creature who, as he trod on her infinitesimal slipper, gave him a *grandissime coup de poing* and called him a *giaour*. . . . The vision must have shimmered over the depressing waste of the resumed tours in the summer of 1842, as he sat listening to the south-wind whirling round a lonely inn at Châlons, or brooding at Avignon over the tragic death of the Duc d'Orléans, and noting that the growing unrest had inspired the crowd at the funeral "to hiss a dead body." Does he

not even confess (if we wish to trust him) that as he nears the summit of middle age, the months spent in Italy, Spain and Greece, "forgetful of the entire world, the present, and, particularly, the future", console him for much? The memory of the sunny reality glowed in his mind with a strength that no figment of his imagination ever acquired.

Whatever his genuine sentiments at that time concerning the efforts necessary to win over the coy Academicians, he certainly made them all, and with a thoroughness and a restless anxiety that amused his friends. Not content with performing the conventional *salaams*, he went so far as tremblingly to consult the *sortes Virgilianae*, and, by ingenious scholarship, to extract from them an auspicious meaning. As conscientious in this vote-cadging as in his tours of inspection, he went through it with, of course, a half-amused, half-nervous feeling that failure would gall him, even if the game were not really worth the candle. At all events, by dint of much repeating in different houses (as he put it): "Sir, I consider myself one of the forty wittiest men in France, I am perfectly fit to be a colleague of yours", the prized honour (meaning a salary, peace, and a clear breach with the Romantic follies) fell to him, and at the close of 1843, the historian of the Social War and Catiline's Conspiracy plucked his first fruit from the official Tree of Fame. "The permanent secretary, having put on a pair of gloves which I believe him to wear only on occasions like these, led me by the hand, as if I were his dancing partner, into the middle of the august gathering, who rose to their feet like one man. I made forty bows, one for each member, sat down,

and that was all." To have written *Colomba*, to have saved the Church of Vezelay, or to have conquered official recognition by two " conscientious " tomes of history—which really gives him an inward warmth, as he bows forty times, this so young Academician, with his so disillusioned air ? We can but fear that the last of the three wins the day.

But as if to pay himself the luxury of a final relapse, the very next year he plays on pompous officialdom (partly by mistake, it must be owned) a prank which caused him mingled irritation and dry pleasure. He persists in proclaiming that the wave of Tartuffism which has invaded his country for some years is responsible for the grotesque opinions people form ; " the women who dance the polka and follow the sermons of Father Ravignan ", those are the judges whose outraged virtue is entitled to cast aspersions on his book ; there is not in *Arsène Guillot* the slightest thing to hurt, and yet they " open their eyes and mouths as wide as front-doors ". But unfortunately the offending volume appeared on the morrow of his election, in March, to the Académie Française, and the contrast between the green and silver uniform and the little courtesan proved too strong for a number of his electors, who announced in public that they regretted their vote.

" Salvation ", " warnings from above ", " Providence ", " repentance "—certainly, in putting so often on the lips of Madame de Piennes these words accompanied by his own habitual commentaries, Mérimée was perhaps half consciously playing with fire. But he had read the story before what his enemies called an " areopagus of old women ", at the

house of Mme de Boigne, and been met with a most flattering reception of smiles and tears. Why should the grave and reverend signiors of the Academy bridle? It is probable that, less easily moved than the listeners of the tender sex, they saw in this opposition of a pious, but young and attractive woman of society and Mérimée's latest outcast from it, not so much a cuff at religion, but at themselves; and more, although the story cannot detract from the merit of his few masterpieces, it cannot be numbered among them. Filon exaggerates in calling it "the solitary tear of his cold and brilliant work." The pity expended on Saint Clair or Julie de Chaverny, if it be more impersonal, is none the less genuine and breathes in the accounts of their disastrous ends. But it is true that Mérimée, not unnaturally mellowed and beginning to be shaken by the crumbling of his health and the nervous disappointment over life as a whole which penetrates his letters, has given himself more rein in this pleading of the case for "one of our lost sisters". The stupid phrase rises to the mind, with visions of tracts and dark blue bonnets; for since *La Dame aux Camélias*, the meritorious courtesan has been much with us, and we know her stagey faults and virtues too well. But as always with Mérimée, a subject and a situation which in other hands turn swiftly into operas or melodramas, are so governed as not at all to offend our taste. From the beginning, when the poorly-dressed girl, in her misplaced hood of rose-colour ornamented with artificial flowers, is seen by Madame de Piennes burning a candle to Saint Roch ("because", as she confesses afterwards her mother had told her,

" it could not fail to bring her within eight days a man to live with ") to the quiet pathos of the close—

" She has passed away, poor young lady ! " said the watcher at last bringing his snuff-box close to Arsène's lips : " You see, the glass is not blurred. She is dead."

" Poor child ! " cried Max aloud, coming out of the stupor that seemed to hold him. " What happiness has she had in this world ? "

Suddenly, as if brought back to life by his voice, Arsène opened her eyes : " I have loved ", she murmured in a dull voice.

She was moving her fingers and seemed to want to hold out her hands. Max and Madame de Piennes had come nearer and each taken one of them.

" I have loved ", she said again with a sad smile.

These were her last words. Max and Mme de Piennes held her icy fingers for a long while without daring to raise their eyes.

There is certainly no profiting by the strangeness of the intrigue to secure the effect ; that is done, as usual, by selecting most carefully the traits most fraught with meaning, and linking them up. And yet there is a kind of wilful sourness in this dig at society ; Mérimée, who had so recently tasted the delights of the *maquis*, could not, with his " very definite ideas ", be expected to fall back into the code of the salons without kicking against the pricks. We feel a too great ease, almost a gloating over this opposition of the girl's simplicity to the conscious virtuousness of Mme de Piennes ; the author is too much of an artist to make the latter wholly unpleasant, or the former a paragon, and yet, probably because it is outworn, the subject

leaves us, by the summariness of its conclusions, a little impatient. Never has his taste been more apparent for denying a true and varied life to a world which provided Balzac with countless beings of flesh and blood. In Mérimée's hands, they resemble the doll Olympia, perfection itself when she is in motion, but who, when we leave her, drops back into her fixedness, brilliant and empty of character; and we forget her, remembering only her song.

But the "august gathering" allowed Mérimée's very real preoccupation with history to atone for such lapses, and he became, as we could foresee, an assiduous member, after the red hot ploughshares of February 1845, his entrance speech, which he was compelled to make on Charles Nodier. His instinct for the truth and his desire not to disgrace himself by telling too much of it about a writer whose character appealed to him as little as his Romantic effusions, must have given an odd flavour to the discourse; but although his delivery was bad and he was afflicted with a severe cough, he concluded, as we often find when he has spoken in public, tolerably well content with himself. So, when he is not groaning at the hardships inflicted on him by his expeditions (hair in the food at Parthenay, disappointment with a second descent on Strasburg and with the flat country round Poitiers), he sits in his green coat, *couleur estragon*, and makes lifelike sketches of his neighbours on the Academy benches, with that ever agile pencil which has just served to reproduce a pillar or a statue. In 1845, having passed through Toulouse, where he must butter up a deputy, and eaten figs of all colours at Avignon,

without any particular appetite (*Eheu fugaces*!), he reaches Barcelona where the claims of Don Pedro are furthered by an obliging archivist, and last Madrid (here is the discontent again: "On the whole, I find Madrid less agreeable in 1845 than I did in 1840") where the same monarch sends him ploughing through more manuscripts and more dust. But at Perpignan, to the horror of a colonel of artillery in his company, he had entered into a conversation in Romany, with two gipsy muleteers, and had shown himself even more expert than the men themselves, who returned him the most brilliant flatteries on his gifts; and if the cold is too intense for him to go to Toledo, his heart, which he thinks to be vaguely fossilising, melts again in the warmth of a city where people "have tragic faces when the object of their desires does not appear at the hour agreed on", and where there is "a most natural sound of sighing that no one represses". And, as a runner puts out his whole strength, strains nerve, muscle and blood-vessel because he knows himself to be panting over the last yards, Mérimée seems, in 1845, to stand straight up, forget his carpings, and with nearly all the old gallantry and ease throw a final cockade at the feet of his Ideal.

"She was wearing a very short red petticoat which left in full view a pair of white silk stockings not free from holes, and charming little shoes of red Morocco leather, tied with flame-coloured ribbons. She had drawn back her mantilla to let her shoulders be seen, together with a big bunch of cassia in the opening of her chemise. She had a cassia flower in the corner of her mouth, and she came forward

swaying on her hips, as if she had been a colt from the stables at Cordoba. In my country, a woman in such a costume would have made everyone cross themselves. At Seville, not a man but threw at her some bold compliment on her appearance; and she answered every one of them, hand on hip and side-long eyes, shameless as the gipsy she truly was."

Not all the operas in the world can spoil this picture; and Carmen, the superb animal, as these words superbly engrave her, has survived as many inferior singers as she did bullets and knives. She is Mérimée's one immortal evocation. They say that elderly men's passions burn with a more dangerous glow than those of unthinking youth, because a nascent despair blows them to a steady heat. Carmen is not less real to-day than she was when the Basque officer let the *gitanilla* escape after she had made a red X on the face of the working girl who had called her the daughter of Satan, and loved her and stole and murdered for her until Fate ordered him to shake off the spell by fulfilling the law of the Romany. "They became less wild at the sight of a douro"! Mérimée has made ample amends for the airy verdict of former days; he has done something illogical, and from him, that is the most priceless homage. For he has taken a gipsy, not an Andalusian girl, and set her up as the symbol of Spain; he has told her story with neither more nor less than his former skill, and the contained force, the intertwined passion in the pages sets them in a perpetual vibration unknown elsewhere in his work; and his *être d'exception*, an exotic rarity, moves and haunts us like any more homely and well-prized heroine of fiction. She swings through her detestable,

ruinous, harpy life, without Colomba's stern dignity to palliate her relentlessness; and like her creator, she will move heaven and earth to help the friends she selects, and all other faces are those of her natural enemies. In the lonely gorges round Cordoba, he bids her Hail and Farewell. Don José is tired of killing her lovers.

"José" (answered she) "you ask of me the impossible. I love you no longer; you, you are still in love with me and that is why you desire my death. I could easily put you off with a lie; but it is so little worth the trouble! Everything is over between us. As my *rom*, you have the right to kill your *romi*; but Carmen will always be free. Gipsy she was born, gipsy she must die."

"So you love Lucas?" I asked her.

"Yes, I loved him, as I loved you, for a moment, perhaps less than you, but now, I no longer love anything, and I hate myself for having loved you."

I threw myself at her feet, I took her hands, I drenched them in tears, I reminded her of all the moments of happiness we had enjoyed together. I offered to remain a brigand to please her. Everything, sir, everything; I offered her anything in the world if she would but love me again!

She said to me: "Love you again, that I cannot. Live with you, that I will not".

A fury possessed me. I drew my knife. I should have liked to see her tremble and beg for mercy, but this woman was a demon.

"For the last time", I cried, "will you stay with me?"

"No! no! no!" she said, stamping her foot.

I struck her twice. It was One-Eye's knife I had taken, for I had broken my own. She fell, without crying out, at the second blow. I seem to see yet, her great black eye gazing fixedly at me till it became misty and closed. I remained for a good hour by this dead body, in a thoughtless stupor. Then I remembered that Carmen had often told me she would like to be buried in a wood. I dug her a trench with my knife, and I laid her in it. I searched a long time for her ring, and finding it at last, I laid it in the grave by her, with a little cross. Perhaps I did wrong. After that I mounted my horse, I galloped to Cordoba, and I told the first guardsman I met who I was. I said I had killed Carmen; but I would not tell them where her body could be found. The hermit was a true saint; he prayed for her! He said a mass for her soul . . . Poor child! It is the Romany who are to blame for bringing her up in that way."

And in a trice, Mérimée with a brusque movement of reaction goes off into a treatise on the number and the characteristics of the gipsies to be found in Europe, their looks, their dirt, their language, and so on. Like Dr Caligari putting on his spectacles and staring blankly at all comers, he slips back into the skin of the archaeologist riding over Andalucia to unearth the site of the battle of Munda, where "for the last time Caesar went double or quits against the champions of the Republic". But not the most elaborate show of disinterest can blur the drama's red and black violence; and, for not the first time, Caesar finds himself conquered by a gipsy. . . .

From this time onwards, Mérimée's life unfolds

itself with a perfect simplicity. Not only does he live it in the open light which illumines even the most silent frequenter of courts and salons, but that subtle antagonism between his creative talent and his instinct to chronicle fades away and almost dies. For *L'Abbé Aubain*, a pettish little satire on a society woman who beguiles a stay in her country seat by imagining a poor young abbé to be timidly amorous of her, whereas the poor young abbé has ingeniously utilized this "passion" to make it necessary for him to be given a cure both richer and freer from temptations, cannot count save as a piece of soured Balzac; a Balzac who shall have woken in the morning with a preying indigestion, and no desire to probe deeper than the hated surface of life. What is more, it is a distressing relapse into the frothy comments on his time, which he cannot make without wit, but a wit that sits less agreeably on his mature shoulders. *Wilhelm Meister* jostles *Mauprat*, Byron is dragged in to be set opposite Lamartine—*Carmen* has spoilt us for all these pinpricks administered to the snobberies of the town. History will not stand him in better stead; but it is pleasanter to think of him being coldly ponderous over Don Pedro than flinging the paper darts of his youth at a society which in 1846 he depends on and does not cease to cultivate. The tours continue, an occupation which shows him always in his best light, although he finds the "provinces every year stupider and more intolerable". Always bent on escaping from boredom, he consoles himself for the growing feeling of isolation in Paris by earning a huge success in the mountains of the

Ardèche, by telling hair-raising ghost stories to a circle of peasants, " in a splendid moonlight which lit up admirably the regular features and showed the young women's fine black eyes, while it hid their dirty stockings and the filth of their hands." Thus he shuns the wrath that he feels to be approaching, when the picturesque will be swamped in the most sordid and human of realities.

As he leaves his mother's house and instals himself in the rue Jacob, his solitariness irks him the more, not only for " the neo-Catholicism in the air ", but for more than one explosion in the street of a bomb scattering anti-proprietary leaflets. His comfort and security seem to him, and rightly, in danger. He can take refuge on the Rhine, or pacify his nerves by exploring the country round the Moselle (though " he finds nothing lovely since crossing the Tmolus "), and watching the Germans pack themselves with food at impossible hours; but every return to Paris is marked by some portent for him to interpret in the gloomiest sense. He hears that in Brittany, there is no bread, not even potatoes, forthcoming; the trial of the Duc de Praslin puts him into a frenzy by the evil impression he knows it must give— " these imbecile judges, when they find before them not an escaped convict, but a great French name, are flat on the ground before it." He talks at one moment of being sent to Algiers, where " our officers destroy Roman and Arab monuments with a great impartiality "; but the blind march of events comes down on him, the upsurging of that popular rage which he hates and despises, born as he is into a century where the perishing crowns and thrones make

too great a clatter for the voice of art to be clearly heard.

And yet, the revolution of 1848 in France, although it nipped in the bud the rather problematic success of his *Don Pèdre*, awoke in this mournful observer a discreet heroism which is not the least attractive side of his paradoxical nature. For Mérimée, who had slipped into office under the protecting wing of the Orleanists, might well be a clearly-designated butt for the revenge of the Provisional Government. But he stuck to his post; and his letters to Mme. de Montijo, which enable us to follow the course of the rising from its outset, prove that it was not his old, peering curiosity that persuaded him to refuse her offers of shelter. "I have my duties, and I shall make a point of performing them." It was a question not only of helping to transfer to the Palais-Royal the treasures of the Tuileries, after giving his arm to his women-friends and leading them from it on the 24th of February, of being enrolled in the *garde nationale* and defending the Chamber against the Socialist attack on the 15th of May; this worshipper of order must look on at a spectacle uniting all the most detested horrors of rhetoric, bloodthirstiness, uneducated enthusiasm and hate, and this time not as an amused foreigner. True, when the barricades of February have disappeared and Louis-Philippe has fled to England, he finds time to be amazed at a temporary semblance of discipline, and to admire the restraint of individuals in the midst of the worst turmoil. "Certain workmen have themselves brought to the Museum cameos taken from the palace, worth more than 100,000 francs . . .

I begin to get accustomed to the thing, and to be reconciled to the strange figures of the conquerors, who, what's stranger still, behave themselves like gentlemen. . . ." But his ideas are too radically upturned; the agony underneath is a genuine one. "The man who intends to write the history of the nineteenth century must know how to run over the whole scale, from tragedy to vaudeville . . . there have not been more than 80 dead. In sober truth, the dynasty of July fell under the hail of hisses rather than under gunfire. . . . The revolution has been accomplished by 600 men, most of whom did not know either what they were doing, or what they wanted. . . . You cannot imagine how I suffer in the midst of the disorder to which this poor country is abandoned. . . . Each day brings the news of a throne overturned—kings have become an impossibility. . . . Whatever they say, liberty is lost in this country." And from the depths of his bitterness: "All things considered, cowardice forms the basis of the French character. No one has any daring. Add to that a besetting fault of our time and our country; envy and the hate of superiority." The dilettante is really trapped this time; and he turns savagely and bites the hand of his captor, *La Bêtise.*

Even at the sessions of the Academy, it is understood that the members must deliver harangues on "our sacrosanct republic", and when he receives Ampère with an awkward, formal discourse, he must follow suit. As for literature, he remarks sadly that for a long time placards and manifestoes will be the sole examples of it. He comes away from a dinner given by Monckton Milnes, where

Considérant has led the conversation, "talking very loud and banging the table, extremely republican in his manners". The shipwreck brings about strange encounters in the water full of driftwood. "One of the women present had a pair of magnificent eyes which she kept bent on her plate. . . . It was Madame Sand . . . infinitely better looking than in the old days . . . we examined each other with great interest. Is not that a well-mixed company for dinner, and could anyone but an Englishman have thought of it?" For five whole days, he sleeps in his uniform when and where he can during the frightful bloodshed of the June riots. On the shops in the rue Saint Antoine can be seen, chalked up by the revolutionaries, the words: "Death to all thieves"—and at the next corner, he must arrest and bear off to prison a woman who is using her kitchen knife to chop the soldiers' heads, and a man bloody from wrist to elbow. As he says: "All the traits of heroism and ferocity that the mind can conceive". And, despairingly, he sums it all up, as he reaches his home in abject exhaustion: "The people have composed sentiments for themselves out of a melodramatic literature, and the loathsome press which corrupts them as much as it wants. Will it ever, ever be possible to do anything with a people for whom a day of rioting is a holiday, always ready to slaughter and let themselves be slaughtered for a word empty of meaning?" Poor, shortsighted eyes, which forget how they once looked at this ant-like humanity from the remoteness of Sirius, and now, brought close down to it, find it imperfect and will not ever recover from the sight!

For Mérimée, with his positive intelligence, cannot yet mount up into a philosophical detachment and view the revolt as part of the ineluctable evolution of things; besides, his own clarity of mind expects from his compatriots something akin to itself, and because they are impatient and blind, he condemns them wholesale. So resignation ploughs a deeper furrow in the Mask; and as he sighs now for a Napoleon to take this 18th of Brumaire in hand and weld the disorder into shape, so with the advancing years his Caesarian obsession takes on an ever harder outline. He will not be kept waiting long; but the definite shape assumed in his longing by the vision will make it difficult for the Caesar of 1851 to pass muster.

In the meantime, it is always possible, without roaming very far, to profit by the quiet restored at the end of 1848, when to the intense surprise of everyone but the fatalistic head on which the honour has fallen, the Prince Louis Napoleon by a vast majority of votes is elected President of the Second Republic. Mérimée, with a shrug of indifference or resignation, turns from what he does not doubt is a mere variant of the usual muddle and consoles himself with the thorny joys of Russian irregular verbs. "They may one day be of use to me for talking to the Cossacks in the Tuileries." It had happened once; why not again? But the language quickly made a deep impression on his mind; its richness ("it is the finest in Europe, Greek not excepted") and its spicy idioms captivated him, and he must have been one of the few Frenchmen of his time who were capable of comparing its novel merits with those of more degenerate and corrupt tongues. To this new

venture of his maturity we must be thankful not only that he broke ground still virgin in France, but that the result of his studies replaced not too discreditably the exhausted springs of his inspiration. His translations of Pushkin's *The Queen of Spades* and *The Pistol-Shot* and of Gogol's *Inspector*, the first two of which stood in a close kinship to his own genius, are now forgotten. But they can be taken as models of the kind, and they give a comforting illusion that his dryasdust historical Muse had not yet wheedled him away from the living art of his time even in the years leading up to the Second Empire.

He is growing old with a disgruntled acknowledgment of his inadaptability to a new age, we can perceive as early as 1849. By a curious return of fortune, and the caprice of Augustine Brohan, what must have seemed a ghost, and an untimely one, of his regretted past rises up before him. Mlle. Brohan is tired of playing *soubrettes*. Her eye falls on La Perichole. Mérimée, raising his studious brow from his Russian primer, shows a face bare of illusions in answer to the proposal of Arsène Houssaye, the director of the Théâtre Français; he is known to find Mlle. Brohan an enchantress, but alas! his cold clairvoyance tells him that the spirit of Mme de Piennes has entered into politics, and what is more, that a powerful Catholic party,[1] even if they defend him and the country against the raging wild-beasts of Socialism, have not the merit of being able to tolerate squibs thrown at their beliefs. Besides, a more cogent reason yet for keeping La Périchole out of the limelight: "I find, in spite of my fatherly affection for the work, that it

[1] Under Falloux.

resembles in no way a *comedy*[1]. . . . I have not the slightest habit of the stage, and I feel I am particularly unsuited to writing for the theatre." But the critic's scalpel so fearlessly used on himself did not avert the misfortune. Mérimée entered a box one evening at the Théâtre Français, and hearing a considerable hissing, asked who was the author of the unlucky piece. "Myself? Then I will hiss, too", and he suited the action to the word. Thus the legend. Arsène Houssaye, who had furthered the scheme with a fashionable young director's longing to startle, and was himself not at all averse to baiting the authorities, hints in his *Confessions* at a much greater irritation on the part of the author, whose play did not outlive 5 performances in 1850, after he had defended himself for a whole year against the blandishments of the actress. It would not be surprising. *Le Dramaturge Malgré Lui* is not a greatness everyone would care to have thrust upon them; and, as Mérimée pointed out, the play had been written "at a time when to poke fun at viceroys and bishops was to show more than a little courage." The Academician, looking back at his practical-joking self of 1829, could not be expected, through the fog of years, to distinguish still a desire to tilt so gaily at conventions. "When I was a child, I spake as a child. . . ." But it is an odd paradox that he made his admission concerning his incomprehension of the stage on the subject of the only one of his dramatic experiments which has,

[1] Mlle Valentine Tessier and M. Jacques Copeau, by the performances at the Vieux Colombier, have most gloriously given the lie to Mérimée, who affirmed that "the play had 20 years ago all the success it could lay claim to—it drove Mme la Duchesse de Berry to cancel her subscription to the *Revue de Paris*."

since those straightlaced evenings in 1850, afforded unmingled delight to spectators in the same city.

Mercifully, there remained the ever-consoling *bêtise* of other countries to distract Mérimée from that of his own. As he zigzagged from London to Alsace and back during the years when the eruption seethed at home that was to put a changed outline on the summits, his impressions showed none of their pristine amiability; his faith in the world as a possible place to inhabit had suffered too great a shock. His health, too, once and for all, had been undermined by exposure during the awful June days, and he saw England with new glasses that magnified the truth. "Decidedly, the English are individually stupid, and in the mass, an admirable people. Everything that can be done with money, common sense, and patience, that they have; but they have about as much notion of the arts as my cat." The new House of Commons is a "frightful monstrosity; we had no idea as yet of what can be done with an absolute lack of taste and two million pounds sterling." Both Oxford and Cambridge, where he spends a few days with "gentlemen of the cloth", grate on his nerves, and he decides that monks are preferable. "I am beginning to have enough of this country. I am exasperated by the perpendicular architecture and the quite as perpendicular manners of the inhabitants. . . . A hellish wind and filthy cold (this in June, needless to say) . . . I gave half-a-crown to a gentleman in black who showed me the Cathedral, and then I asked him for the address of a man for whom I had a letter from the Dean. . . . It turned out to be himself, he looked very foolish and so did I; but

he kept the money". . . . "The women here have hoops on their dresses. It is impossible to see anything more ridiculous than an Englishwoman in a hoop." Stonehenge he finds breathing space to approve of, as well as a "little hippopotamus in the Zoological Gardens, which is being fed on milk and rice." So he beats against the bars of his weariness, with the Voltairian gloating over the vain grotesqueness of humanity; and how near is a hippopotamus to a Houyhnhnm!

This half-touching, half-exasperating pettishness against a hostile planet came to a head in the year 1852, and took on a deeper and more justifiable note. Mérimée had returned in December 1851 to a Paris whose look reminded him "of February 24th, except that the bourgeois seemed to be frightened of the military". He welcomed with a movement of intrigued curiosity very natural to him the "turning reef", as he called it, of December 2nd. If he could not justly call the new Caesar *franchement canaille*, he could expect for him, as for his prototype, that he would become "an honest man if they let him live". At all events, the opening skirmishes of the most incredible adventure that ever illumined a drab, industrial century could not but amuse the dilettante. And then came the Libri affair and the death of his mother; and his state of mind as he lay in September of the following year desperately ill at Moulins, or imagining himself to be so, represented the crisis out of which the adventure dragged him back to an undisturbed old age. "I was in a state of physical and moral prostration which made the slightest outing horribly disagreeable. I felt, it is true, a

certain irritation at entering an unknown world; but what seemed to me even more tiresome, was to make any resistance." For he was, and felt, "absolutely alone"; and whatever the quality of the chains that had bound him to the clear-minded old lady with the eyes empty of dream, they had been strong ones. She had meant to the rather spoilt and very pernickety little boy a refuge very like that of his own mind, yet human, and at the same time, a vestige of meaning in the general madhouse of things made dearer by a composition of respect and affection that it is impertinence to analyse. Now, she had left him, painlessly, and with not a second's afterthought for her placid atheism; and the stoic end that left him so lonely, left him also that bitter pride.

Who knows, too, what part had been played by his animosity against his lifelong Enemy in the unlucky chivalry of the preceding summer? There is no doubt that, even while he admitted Libri's defence of his actions to be clumsy and provocative, he was nevertheless nine parts convinced of his innocence. But that manuscript spirited away in Brittany, and the accusations of the Breton "cads", when he was sure that the representatives of the Ecole des Chartes had had a hand in the villainy, all that had rankled. Now that the Clericals, under whose powerful wing the archaeological group headed by that very School could flourish like a bay-tree, were flaunting their egregious authority, what more likely than that Libri, a man of the world and a scholar like himself, was being exposed to the same persecution? The hated pontiffs had had the audacity to condemn

the distinguished librarian to an imprisonment fortunately nominal, for he had quickly removed himself and all his belongings over the Channel; and the accusation? that of having removed from the State collections certain precious volumes which were among the treasures he had been supposed to watch over. Mérimée had never heard a charge so preposterous, and said so, with infinite details, in the *Revue des Deux Mondes*. What he considered as the "three imbeciles in black robes" were not slow to take umbrage; he was himself called to answer for this insult to justice, and found himself asked to pay 1,000 francs and to spend a fortnight in the Conciergerie. The Ministry "granted him the leave he asked for, expressing at the same time their regret that he would make such a bad use of it." Even here, he sailed through the rocks, guided by the good genius of officialdom. His fortnight's "retirement" he contrived to turn to excellent use, for he resumed his poring over the Russian verbs, listened to his fellow-prisoners discussing the motives and success of their crimes, allowed himself to be pampered by visitors with fruits and other delicacies; and when he found himself again in the street, he realised that "he had not experienced a single moment of boredom." Once again, erudition and the *caractères d'exception* had come to his aid. As for his protest, he remained till his dying day convinced of Libri's innocence; but he confessed dryly to Mme. de Montijo that he had "disobeyed that very just precept of M. de Montrond,[1] which recommends one always to beware

[1] Talleyrand.

of first impulses, because they are nearly always honourable."

No sooner was he free than he must embark on the wearisome business of a move, this time to the house at 52, rue de Lille which remained his home till he left Paris once and for all, and which like himself did not survive the Commune. Here is the figure which, after much grumbling and pother, settled down to infuse his sarcastic spirit into the intimacy of the four new walls, among the huge, well-upholstered seats, with at the end a divan in a sort of alcove, and in every corner a heap of embroidered cushions[1]; "Mérimée was tall, spare and slim; his face, always carefully shaved, had nothing remarkable in it, except for a vast forehead and two grey eyes under beetling eyebrows, that were thick and already turning grey. This bony head with the prominent cheekbones and the nose rather large at its end, was the reverse of aristocratic; but he was always most carefully turned out, and that gave him nevertheless the look of a distinguished man of the world. . . . It is quite true that his manner of addressing people had a slight English touch about it; he spoke slowly, in an even tone, almost hesitatingly at the start; nothing lively or marked; he hardly laughed at all, even when he told the most comic or the spiciest stories. A veneer of reserve and cold distinction remained always with him, even among men and those who were his intimate friends. The contrast between his discreet behaviour and the expressions he used, especially when he attacked the more scabrous

[1] The impression is that of Edouard Grenier, a poet who lived in the same house.

topics, gave a real flavour to his conversation. It has been said that he put on an affectation of cynicism; no, he was affected in nothing; he had too much taste for that. Only, he was not afraid to be cynical, and he never shrank from the proper word, or the improper word, if you like it better."

Round this odd personality would circulate his "governesses" and his cats, the former no less quiet and indispensable than the latter. The Goncourt brothers, with their cursory way of taking shirtcuff notes on their contemporaries, have chosen to drop a sardonic remark about the two devoted old ladies, Miss Lagden and Mrs Ewers, the last relics of Mme Mérimée's salon, and foster-sisters of Prosper; but her son himself had thought of the term 'governess' and to reproduce it could not rob it of its mingled tenderness and humour. As for the silent, stalking felines:

*Les amoureux fervents et les savants austères*
*Aiment également, dans leur mure saison*
*Les chats puissants et doux, orgueil de la maison,*
*Qui comme eux sont frileux et comme eux sédentaires,*

Not that Mérimée, who detested Baudelaire and French poetry, would have consented to be enrolled in either of these last categories; but there is something of that picture in the comfortable retreat of the rue de Lille. There is more. Whenever, as was soon to be, solicitous folk pressed the *savant austère* to break the ice of his solitude by taking to him a wife, he would answer that he could not think of it, that he would rather have liked to bring up a little girl (preferably an adopted one), that he had after all a little experience of bringing up small creatures—his cats. But—"When I had a cat, I was delighted to

play with him ; but if ever he showed a desire to leave me for the lady cats on the housetops or the mice in the cellar, I used to wonder if I had the right to retain him for my own personal amusement. I should question my conscience on that score much more scrupulously with regard to a woman." And the well-meaning dowager or friend would turn away, and decide that M. Mérimée was day by day growing worse and more cynical. But the *amoureux fervent* knew what the *savant austère* might have been too absent-minded to notice—that he was growing old. " The best thing is, I fancy, to accustom oneself to live like a tree, and to be resigned."

Alas ! if that was the conclusion his mature years had brought him to, how imprudent was it to venture out of the cloistral safety ! Already in 1852, he had noticed how the spring had entered bringing a kind of " soft relaxation and happiness." The righteous gloom of the Second Republic had been chased away by the great transformation scene ; the rhetoricians and the blousy minister's wives had been driven from the Tuileries, and, as in a pantomime, the Prince Charming had come into his own. And the monarch, whose theatrical violence had earned the approval of seven and a half million Frenchmen, had no need to make useless gestures, or to bolster up his claims with the serried ranks of the Jesuits, or to put on a more than bourgeois top-hat and coat, and walk round among his citizens. The gesture needed was that of Bonaparte on the pass of the Saint Bernard ; an heroic arm and a curvetting horse, proving to all that the loosened knot of the tradition had been fastened again, the tradition that bound the days of

the Coup d'Etat to those of the 18th of Brumaire, that would bind the Crimea to Jena and Wagram, the crinoline to the paniers of the eighteenth century. Even if Mérimée was by now too enrooted in history to judge a new general or a new tyrant by any other standard than that of Caesar, the whole string of romantic leaps into power, the tenebrous sallies of Ham and Strasburg, the cloak and sword conspiracy of the 2nd of December, and now the champing of bits and the frou-frou of silk and satin round the palace were there to outdo brigands and gipsies, to recall him, as with the trumpets of the Guides, to his youth and his Romantic errors. Mistrustful as ever, no one could blame him for a certain incredulity with regard to the success of the brilliant adventure. "I have seen four-and-twenty leaders of revolutions. . . ." But Fate, as if a feminist must be hoist with his own petard, shot him out of his mournful seclusion into this new glory of jewels and chandeliers, using for sole charge, by a supreme irony which he could not but appreciate, a Spanish petticoat.

## V

The sensation of drawing up the marriage-contract of a young lady of noble family whom he had once held on his knee and instructed in the primal mysteries of French grammar, must have surprised even Mérimée. In 1834, when Mme de Montijo had made a stay in Paris, her salon had counted among its most favoured habitués, Henri Beyle and Prosper Mérimée.

M. Beyle was rather terrifying. He would take the little fair-haired Eugenia on his knee and wagging his finger at her, say gravely: "You, when you are grown up, you will marry a great lord, and I shall think no more about you." And then he would break into a wonderful story of shakos and snow and tangled beards and cannons and Corsican generals, until Paca and Eugenia were both dumb with suppressed enthusiasm, and were almost disappointed when M. Mérimée would take them by the hand, and lead them out into the dull Paris streets, to fill them with chocolate and cakes. And now—how like lightning the years have flashed by!—an enchanting horse-woman, slender as Artemis, sitting her mount as securely as a Cossack, has galloped through the glades of the Fontainebleau forest, close in the track of the fanfare, and everyone points and smiles, the men amused and sceptical, the women convinced and a trifle sharp about it; for the rider in her eighteenth century habit is said to hold in the palm of her hand an Imperial heart.

Arsène Houssaye has reported that Mérimée found something of the delight of his novelist's years in dictating the letters written by Eugenie de Montijo to Napoleon III at the time of his courtship, and that his psychological cunning took pleasure in watching the recipient first amused, then interested, and at last caught in the net of passion. However all this be, it is certain that in January, 1853, when the announcement of this fairy-tale match had run round a country always disposed to favour gallantry, even in the face of unreason, Mérimée was naturally asked to fill a page with the heraldic titles of this

grandee's daughter for her contract of marriage with the sleepy-eyed but unshakeable idealist of the Tuileries. And before he knew where he was, he found himself lifted out of his Inspector's rut and raised to the dignity of senator. Fresh fields and pastures new at the age of fifty! It must have been, in spite of all, with a tinge of melancholy that he said good-bye to the rackety coaches and traps, the discomfort and the *bonnes fortunes* of the inns, the hairs in the soup and the discourses of one M. Homais after another. For he had accomplished a life-work that not only set before the public its concrete results, but showed the way to his successors and those of Viollet-le-Duc; they might refine on the first decisions, but for hard work and care for detail, the two pioneers could not be outdistanced. The young and ravishing Empress had flung her white arms round her husband's neck, for granting her this very reasonable caprice, and for strengthening the ties of affection that already bound her to "Monsieur Mérimée" by ties of gratitude. Both Viollet-le-Duc and the new senator would form part of the aureole of talent that brightened the palmy days of Compiègne and Saint-Cloud; the restorer of Gothic façades was to spend his ingenuity on the construction of scenery for the adored charades; the famous novelist would try his hand at a pastime which the first in the realm would not disdain, the *comédie de salon*. But if he forgot them, the French nation mightt well remember the words he wrote on a dead acquaintance, Alexandre du Sommerard, who with his collection laid the base of the Musée de Cluny as we see it now: "He was one of the first

to distinguish the characteristics of this despised art; he understood its beauties, he penetrated, as it were, into its secrets. A great critical sagacity and a very subtle talent for observation were necessary to divine the laws of this archaeology, a land yet unexplored." As his compatriots look at the strange beauty of the Church of Vezelay, at the Cathedral of Laon, at the Roman theatres of Orange and Arles, and that church of Saint Savin in Poitou to which he gave a significance that was the result of a whole arsenal of knowledge brought to play on it, can they not justifiably shift this eulogy on to the founder of the Commission for Historical Monuments?

In 1853, then, when Mérimée returned to Carabanchel, the country home of Mme de Montijo near Madrid, it was an understood thing that the eminent man she welcomed could no longer remain the disgruntled and industrious cenobite of the rue de Lille, content to sit up late at night writing out the fifth version of an historical report that few would read, or to spend desultory days in helping the families of Beyle and Jacquemont to sell manuscripts or to publish letters. From being a super, intelligently taking part in the action of the State drama, but unnoticed or discretely effacing himself, he was, by the very virtue of his friendship with the châtelaine of this house, moving in the most glaring limelight, and expected to make a creditable show as a personage of importance. Needless to say, from the opening years of this unsolicited prominence, all disillusion as he was, he made no scrap of display; his ideas and his manners were too fixed for him to be capable of vainglory, and he contrived, in spite of the limelight,

to divert himself always by the acute study of the protagonists in the play. It is true that he had reached the age and the point in his literary reputation when respect and listening ears are welcome, when the various cushions of attention offered to him, especially when a young and small hand was the offerer, were by no means to be refused.

He arrives at Carabanchel in the full tide of his new vogue to find preparations being made for a show of amateur theatricals (the first of so many !) in honour of his hostess. Delighted with her good fortune, he recommends her to take a rest now from marriage-making and "be a little selfish". But he knows that her active mind and heart will never be still, and that when she has brought a couple to the altar, she will return to the history of Spain, or be caught up in an intrigue for a fresh revolution, as she has always done. "She married and amused people to the end of her days." Thus will he compose her epitaph, and we see the attraction of this fine vitality, which for Mérimée, and still more in his declining years, spelled eternal charm. He allows himself to be fluttered round by nine women (under the eye of the hostess, who perhaps had her matrimonial plot even for him), and since he is the only male, to be nicknamed "Apollo"; but his benevolence is not too resigned for him to see how the "little ferocious look" of four of them, who are of pure Andalucian blood, "suits them admirably". And he wonders what they all do when they are not engaged in love-making, for they never open a book, and he concludes that they never think of anything else, being all like the impatient young lady who, when the news of

Eugénie de Montijo's engagement to the Emperor reached Madrid, had jumped up in her box at the theatre, and demanded forthwith to be taken to France, for "there's no future for anyone in this country". But, apart from all this, the old gnawing demon begins to plague him; his shaky health cannot stand the November winds from the Guadarrama, and even his nine Muses cannot cheer him back to his first fine careless raptures over the country of his election.

It was about this time that his sudden exposure to publicity laid him open to the designs, not only of worldly matchmakers, but of those who would venture on an even more private ground. It may have galled Mérimée, but it certainly could not surprise him, that he should be put up as an Aunt Sally at public banquets like that of Caen, condemned to struggle against his desire to throw a rum jelly at the speaker who was celebrating his dazzling qualities as "senator, man of letters and scholar". Such homages, conveyed in the right time and place, merely filled him with a genuine amusement; that the Viennese, for instance, should treat him as a notability, as they did on his visit in 1854, and with a heightened *Gemüthlichkeit* implore him to immortalize all their albums, was not displeasing to him, for the fascination of the city compensated him for being treated as a lion. Besides, he had been taken to see "some most beautiful ladies," as a culminating pleasure after the succulent woodcock at Innsbruck, and the tzigane orchestras of Prague that played madly without imparting their frenzy to the heavy-footed dancers; added to which, the news of the Crimean

War arrived a day sooner in Vienna than in Paris; his curiosity, his health and his temper had all been salved, and he was well-disposed to Vienna.

But it would be of a real interest to know exactly what were his feelings when he received, one morning in Paris, a box containing a silver medal of the Virgin! The source was not far to seek. Some days previously, he had met at a dance a lady of respectable years who had seemed disposed to undertake his conversion. We can suppose that her sex not only preserved her from the retort courteous that a man would have met with, but encouraged Mérimée to embark on one of the most curious of his correspondences, and to sustain it for over ten years. Evidently, the reflective moods of his middle age had something chastening in them; for he wrote to Mme de Montijo begging her to send him one of the prayer ribbons from Our Lady of Atocha which were "full of virtues", that he might "pay the lady back in her own coin". But he paid her more richly than she ever perhaps expected; for the letters that make up the *Correspondance Inédite*[1] gave her the satisfaction of holding in her hands Mérimée's declaration of faith.

Not that he does not warn her from the outset to waste no prayers on him. "To tell you the truth, I do not believe in my conversion. . . ." And then, politely, he explains: "I am too much of a *matter-of-fact man* (*sic*), I have tried to believe, but I haven't the faith. I am not insensible to poetry, but I have never been able to write it." (How naturally the comparison of religion with an *art* needing inspiration falls from his pen!)

[1] Written to Mme de la Rochejacquelein.

" I am afraid of nothing ; and if I were anxious about another life, I should, in any case, find it difficult to believe that by putting myself on to the road of prudence, I should arrive in Paradise. . . . There is a very good side to all religions. . . . Prayer touches me as the outpouring of unhappiness—I wish I could say to you that I believe in its efficacy." The proselytising lady committed the indiscretion of suggesting that to a man so drawn towards women, belief in the Virgin should be an easy matter ; we can safely say it served her right to receive the answer that, on the contrary, for that very reason, Mérimée found it impossible to attach the slightest credence to the whole of that side of the Catholic faith ! But most of the time, he is serious, melancholy even, and the moments are precious. " For me, the Gospels are a compilation made by illiterate men of different traditions already ancient at the time, intermingled with the popular ideas of the age. . . . But even if I accept for true everything that is in the Gospels, I am not more Catholic, perhaps not even more Christian for that, for the religion that has come out of them does not strike me as bearing much of a resemblance to that of Jesus Christ." He trips up, of course, over the Church ; but time and again he returns to this question of the Gospels, which he has penetratingly understood. " They are the *résumé* of the finest principles, once reserved by the Greek philosophers for a small number of adepts, and now laid open to the access of all mankind without exception.[1] It seems clear to me that there are no better rules of conduct for us to follow, whatever

[1] Cf. Schuré, *Les Grands Initiés.*

doubts we may have about the authenticity of the book." And then, after these eloquent testimonials, which doubtless did not compensate the lady for being baulked of her prey, he returns to the great stumbling block: "I am a sceptic in spite of myself. . . . I understand perfectly the words: 'Seek and ye will find', but I don't think they are applicable to my case. . . . God seems to me very probable; as for the other world, it is difficult for me not to see in it an invention of human vanity." It is lucky Mérimée has not a grain of belief in ghosts; this lapse into a pious agnosticism and the confession of it might have brought at least two amazed phantoms from the rue des Beaux Arts to the apartment in the rue de Lille. As for us, we can regard him with a fresh interest. For the Mask has been lifted a little, and the Face is seen to be not at all that of Don Juan Tenorio, calm hero, who, on crossing the Styx,

*courbé sur sa rapière*
*Regardait le sillage et ne daignait rien voir,*

still less that of his counterpart de Maraña, emaciated with long fasting and prayers, but something much more familiar, and in any case, nearer in nature to ourselves.

But less and less, as it will appear, did Mérimée seek to stand out of the ranks of ordinary men, whether from that general fatigue, or an instinctive return to what has always passed for being the supreme elegance, that of being unnoticed in the crowd. At all events, the inevitable glare of the limelight thrown on the Tuileries, on Fontainebleau and Biarritz, on Compiègne, sufficed him; and it is

fair to say that had not the white ray been perpetually focussed on the lovely Titian hair and the swan's neck of the principal figure, and had he not been bound to her by old and unquestionable ties, he would never have sought to draw the beam towards his own person. As it was, he was amply compensated for being so often forced to don what he called "tight inexpressibles" by the superb vantage point he enjoyed at the Court for gratifying what would certainly be the last infirmity of his mind and the most agreeable—his curiosity. For the grave admissions made to his zealous correspondent on the subject of his soul's salvation had no repercussion on the activities of these crowded years. When the palaces allowed him leisure, he was instantly claimed by unobtrusive ways of making himself indispensable —special commissions, the business of acting as intermediary between one great name and another, all the half-secret occupations which come the way of an intimate of courts who, however well fitted for openly exercising office, has no taste for it. And the visits and journeys, now, at least, made in comfort, if not in the most flourishing health, succeeded one another without a pause. One moment he is to be found in London, where, on his way to Edinburgh, he finds time to rediscover another palace, that of Sydenham, and to remark that the English have spoilt its crystalline purity of style by the erection of enormous monuments to the heroes of the Crimean War, "the heroes of which roll drunkenly all day over the London streets"; then we hear of him at Edinburgh, shocked by the quantity of young women with red hair, and revolving the memories of a stay

with the Duke of Hamilton, in whose grounds were parked a herd of wild oxen that had seemed to him as tame as the 'does[1] of Paris', and whose splendid collections of pictures, Greek vases, and rare bookbindings had been curiously unable to rouse the guests from their aristocratic torpor. "What I never tire of admiring are the *hedgehog* ways of these folk. Even if they were all sent together to prison, they wouldn't become more sociable. The reason is either that, as Beyle used to say, they are afraid of instantly revealing their stupidity, or else that they are built in such a way that they prefer the pleasures of egoism; let him decide who will."

He can forget all this, the grouse and the oxen and the frequent blue devils, at Carabanchel, where he is rewarded by the spectacle of the Comtesse Apraxine, who "smokes, wears round hats and keeps a goat in a salon that she has had strewn with grass"; or he will spend a birthday clambering up the Wengernalp on horseback and drinking his own health in champagne, with the snow for ice-pail. And then, M. Fould, the head of the Emperor's household, guardian of the Imperial purse-strings, transmits suddenly to the distinguished traveller an Imperial whim, that of possessing a library organised, in all points, like that of the British Museum. So the traveller sits down at the head of a Commission—"an immense nuisance" he groans, but he is nevertheless not too averse to consulting his friend Panizzi on the subject, for the director of the British Museum is a man after his own heart, knows a good table and a well-turned leg when

[1] *Daim*—"jeune élégant qui recherche la société des *biches*" (Larousse).

he sees one, and in addition, has raised the Museum and its library to the finest and most smoothly run organization of its kind. And Mérimée decides, typically scrupulous, that he must see for himself; and in the spring of 1858, he is to be found taking the Duke of Malakoff round the Museum, and enraptured at the solemn tranquillity of the halls empty of visitors. He puts endless questions, and takes no fewer notes, and after observing that the acquittal of Bernard[1] passes in England for being the act of a lot of *grocers*, and that the English, who have no respect for the verdict, could not understand the French animosity on the subject (happy, unconscious Island !), he sits down, this time with much of the old satisfaction, to Panizzi's excellent fare. The jovial but subtle director has also his own move on the political chessboard. When the wine has been praised, and the reminiscences of past gallantries have been exhausted, the two epicureans fall tooth and nail on the Church. For Panizzi, of course, the Church is Rome, and Rome is the great obstacle. If he can so far capture the heart of this vassal of the French Empire as to bring the subject of their post-prandial jousting into the open lists of Imperial politics, who knows, he may yet shine out in the London fogs as one of the bright, particular stars in the cause of Italian unity ! Needless to say, Panizzi ended by being received at Biarritz, in that court within a court, where the more significant pullers of strings walked by the Atlantic with Napoleon III and said their say into the ear of that enigmatic monarch. But by the time the Italian charmer attained that

[1] Implicated in the Orsini plot.

goal, the onrush of events had swept the great possibility by; Napoleon, caught between the clericals at home and his fear of a breach with an England clinging to a policy of non-intervention, had entered on that era of compromise which carried him to the mournful close of his reign; Italian liberty had been laid to sleep somewhere behind those unreadable eyes, perhaps forgotten, at all events left to its own devices. For us, Panizzi's fame reposes on the humbler credit of having left us a library of the first order, and on the chance which made him the recipient of some of the most delightful and penetrating views on the Europe of the 19th century that ever took the shape of letters.

But Panizzi was not alone in appreciating the value of being acquainted with one of the Emperor's righthand men—for whatever Mérimée's true opinion of " the master of the house ", his constant presence at the various palaces gave the impression that he was listened to with deference. The great " Pam " himself, and Lady Palmerston were at pains to cultivate the society of this correct French gentleman. Mérimée never ceased to admire his lordship's hunting-squire vigour, which persisted up to an advanced age. " He is always young, drinks, eats, rides—I don't know what he doesn't do. . . . He seems to me a very strange mixture of the statesman and the streetboy. He has all the *aplomb* of an old minister and a schoolboy's taste for adventures." Lady Palmerston received him with British offhandedness, in her bedroom; she was still in a state of irritation due to the recent theft of her diamonds—or, rather, not so much on that account, as because the

gentleman-burglar had washed his hands before leaving with her own special scented soap. . . . Mérimée looked at a table laden with numbered documents. "Evidently, it is here that between Milord and Milady, the affairs of this country are carried through." He had spoken at the Literary Fund banquet, a quarter of an hour's "stupidities in bad English", and Lord Palmerston had seemed quite contented. Mr Gladstone, no doubt, while possessing the advantages of erudition, had been less easy to understand or to please; and the dinner had been indifferent. But they had discussed Homer, and Mr Gladstone's new translation had been brought out and gravely examined—after which Mérimée had gone home, mentally deciding that his host gave him the impression of being a compound of "the child, the statesman and the lunatic"—almost Shakespeare's seven ages rolled into one.

These are the fruits snatched from the boughs as he wanders here and there through the official wood, compensations for his woodman's toil. In the diminishing intervals, the much-courted courtier retreats to the furthest end of his tether. Unluckily, he is becoming indispensable as part of the equipment, as it were, of Fontainebleau or Compiègne. His devotion to the Empress makes him brave all the minor dangers of the complicated and sumptuous procedures gone through for the amusement of the illustrious guests. If he accedes to her wish, and, with much brain-racking, turns out a compliment in verse for the Queen of the Netherlands—"a strange woman, who knows everything, speaks well about everything, and would be perfection's self, did she

not wish to appear French"—he repents of his complaisance, for to dine on the grass and to be drenched while chained to the side of a Royalty are hard conditions, and he feels that the endless balls and charades and picnics could dispense with him. Fortunately, he can nurse his severe cold in Switzerland, and amble down through the Tyrol, with gratifyingly few long English tourist faces to mar the landscape, and hear the fat Tyrolese yodel for nothing, instead of paying to hear a bad concert, until he reaches the broiling sun and Venice.

Here, the quality of the marine air pleases him; but all things considered, the city's bizarre personality does not make the appeal, for example, that Florence, "a city built by artists" had made. "The architecture is decidedly barbarous; it is clearly the merchants who built here—everything is done for decoration, nothing for art." The canals, to his thinking, bear a strong resemblance to the Bièvre; as for the gondola, it is perfect to float along and digest in, but why must it remind of a coffin? On the other hand, the Venetian girls, "with nothing on their feet or heads, would each, if washed and scrubbed, make a perfect Venus Anadyomene". The land of Stendhal's choice finds in him a second Stendhal for the manner of observing it; as for nature, every prospect may please, but man alone, vile as he may be, holds his attention. Even at Bellagio, in the azure calm speared with cypresses, where the clapping of oars or the song of the boatman leave a deeper silence in their trail, he is quite content to limit his ecstasies to the delight of finding in her lake-villa Madame Pasta, who has "singularly increased in width",

and informs him that she is just as happy cultivating her cabbages as bowing before the thunderous applause of the Opéra Italien ; and, in any case, since Rossini, there has not been a single well-constructed opera ; all that Verdi and the like of him invent is a mere harlequin's suit. *Consule Planco* . . . these reminiscences, oases in a world he has no longer the zest even to struggle with, vie with the cathedrals of Lucca and Sienna in galvanizing him to a little enthusiasm, and perhaps, after all, at the end of the journey which deposits him at Cannes, even the two marble masterpieces are effaced in his memory by the soup made with quails and rice, eaten at Milan— " the most remarkable feature of this city ". The sacrilege must have made Beyle stir in his tomb. But Cannes is the condemned man's last breakfast. " The weather is superb, just hot enough to allow of remaining in the shade with pleasure . . . a complete desert, all the hotels empty, not an Englishman in the streets." How crass are the inveterate travellers ! In two months' time, they will arrive to be met with a foul wind from the North ! And he, who asks nothing better than to bask and stroll, must return to the overheated salons of Compiègne, steel himself to the icy walks in the forest, to the enforced amiabilities and the lack of sleep.

And yet, once lodged in the palace, he is not bored. Habit is teaching him to resign himself to bad health ; and for the disinterested spectator, Compiègne unrolls a panorama wherein the whole world of eminent puppets gesticulate in brilliant costumes, laugh, hide their tears or despair, and flutter off the stage. The illustrious hosts go to infinite pains to amuse their

guests; it is hardly their fault if health does not quite fit into the list of their considerations. Something of a smiling memory hovers over the castle where so many kings and princes have slept or been imprisoned, or waited for their royal brides; for the latest crowned inhabitant, the grey walls and the woods spell beauty and grace and a bold throwing down of the glove by high-spirited youth before a dust-encumbered tradition. Here, where the Emperor has ridden by the side of his blonde fiancée, respectfully offering her a diadem whose chief jewel is his own passion, it is natural that the fêtes take on a more animated glow, that the flower of ambition and talent should be assembled as if to continue the gesture of homage. It is not like Saint Cloud, where the weight of the diadem can be forgotten in a comparative intimacy, in rides with the little Prince Imperial, in moving about incognito and calls on neighbours. The Tuileries are the scene of the vast official receptions, before the unhindered scrutiny of the Press and the crowd. Compiègne is the Fontainebleau of the winter, where the *décolleté* and the diamonds have succeeded the voluminous tulle and muslin as the reigning glory, and the lazy canoeing among the greedy carp of the Pond is forgotten in the blaze of chandeliers and the sparkle of Octave Feuillet's wit on the boards of the amateur theatre. An invitation to these Imperial house parties is as eagerly sought after as a ribbon or a post, and their composition, the selecting and blending and discarding of what would clash or fail to amuse, is the Empress's pride. But once the selection made, once the habitués recalled and the new

elements bidden, the spectacle of that gay and innocent festival, at which the rigid censors of the legitimist salons raise their hands in a somewhat prejudicial horror, may take its fling.

As we look back on them, the simple diversions of the Second Empire Court, the lancers, the fancy-dress balls, the games on paper, the portraits and proverbs and charades, take on a deeper pathos. Eugénie de Montijo may well have listened, perched on M. Stendhal's knee, to tales of a great general and his little black hat, but there was another less heroic and more unhappy figure that, even before she reached the throne, had awoken a half-superstitious fascination in her; that of another Queen, as much a foreigner as herself, who could not bear the court etiquette to fill her whole life, and demanded dairy-pails and comedians so that she might remember she was not only a figurehead, but a simple woman. "The Empress is legitimist", her husband would murmur with his disabused smile, and the paradox must have met with no less humorous an appreciation if dropped in M. Mérimée's ear. Besides, when during a week of November, reserved for the *série élégante*, the flight of cosmopolitan beauties would descend on the castle and rustle in and out of the salons, chattering and exchanging *bons mots* with their cavaliers and distantly examining the new arrivals; when the petulant Princess Metternich, with her bold eyes and utter disregard of the expected orderliness, would flit from group to group leaving a shaft here, a witticism there, and in a sudden and frank transport cry out "*Quelle bonne maison*!"; when, on the arm of Edmond About, the Andalucian

Duchesse de Malakoff and the Duchesse d'Albe would float by, calling up before Mérimée all the haughty languor of *Tra los Montes*; when the delicate profile of the treasure Walewski had brought from a visit to Florence would light up with a smile of greeting to the no less blonde and exotic creature that the irresistible Morny had found in Petersburg; and when all this parade of bows and chignons, milky shoulders and excited eyes, would crowd into the palace theatre and sit like a council of butterflies, attentive to the moving *Roman d'un Jeune Homme Pauvre* or a vaudeville of the Duc de Massa, or else at the raising of Waldteufel's bâton break into a whirling valse with the officers fresh from the Italian War, who more than Prosper Mérimée, even if they were disturbing his game of chess, would thank the auspicious hour which with a barb of envy had urged the Empress to recreate for him a century he would have loved to inhabit, by setting up the billowy crinoline as a rival to the paniers of Marie Antoinette?

As for the Empress herself, Mérimée remained tenderly respectful, with the shade of paternal admiration inevitable in one who has watched a bud open and found the expanded bloom more splendid than even he had hoped. As he had unostentatiously braved the rickety vehicles and the exposure of the provinces in order to lay bare the beauties of Gothic art, so in spite of colds and headaches and asthma and sleeplessness, he did not fail to answer the periodical summons to Compiègne. Now that by a revolving cycle of taste his qualities of wit had lifted him into popularity among this new generation of fashionable and frivolous tale-tellers, he had, besides

his gratitude for a senatorship that once again sheltered him from the Grub Street of his time, the sentiment that it was good for him to be there, since he could not be where he often wished—" living in Florence or Mentone, with a cat and a young woman to keep my feet warm ". As Filon puts it, " he amused himself while amusing others." When he was not braving influenza by driving in one of the detested charabancs with an agreeable company of befurred ladies, to shake Viollet-le-Duc by the hand and observe the progress he was making in restoring the Château de Pierrefonds, he would be sitting in a corner concocting his well-known dictation, or scribbling verses for a charade. The dictation,[1] packed with obscure words and traps of the sort that torture the plodding ingenuity of French scholars in English public-schools, would be served up hot in the evening; and we learn with a certain satisfaction, that no Frenchman, but the Prince Metternich himself, made the fewest faults, while M. Octave Feuillet and M. Alexandre Dumas were forced to admit themselves beaten on their own ground.

" The Emperor's fool ", as he jokingly called himself, was indeed an important factor in these relaxations of the great. Whatever we choose to criticize as trifling, as unworthy of a man of letters, in this consent to *desipere in loco* on the part of an author whose extinct inspiration and growing solitude found after all in this artificial warmth an acceptable passage into old age, we may be sure that he deserved in no way the vituperative slash of Victor Hugo.[2] In the still simmering fury excited by the Coup d'Etat, Hugo looked back on the immediate entourage of the

[1] See Appendix II. [2] *Histoire d'un Crime*, vol. 2.

Elysée of those days, and saw in the front rank, along with the hated but respected Morny, the "naturally despicable" figure of Mérimée. "The familiar spirits of the Elysée were of two sorts; fellow-conspirators and courtiers. The first of the fellow-conspirators was Morny; the first or the last of the courtiers was Mérimée. The Elysée needed a literary ornament. Something academical is not out of place in a cavern. M. Mérimée was found ready." This caricature, with any possible molehills of truth turned to mountains, is only to be excused by the poet's sincere political fervour. The days of the macaroni and "Marion Delorme" were long fled; the stiff, correct gentleman must have seemed to the outlaw to embody all this baseness and worse. But there is no need to let ourselves be impressed by this sonorous abuse blown across the great gulf that had long been fixed between him and the wild-haired bard. Mérimée had never pretended to be anything else than a man of the world; Hugo was not the only casual observer to be blind to his more solid merits. We cannot arraign him on more than a charge of excessive amiability for chiming in with the Imperial caprices; and, who knows, in his perpetual harking back to the years of greater spontaneity and greater enthusiasm, a charade was for him the magic word to call up the sight of the little girl and the cake-shop, and Mme de Montijo's earliest evocations of the brown Romany. At all events, even if it is possible to find an opening for sarcasm in this late picture of the academician on all fours in the Court nursery, as it were, there were a great many learned and distinguished personages delighted to be found in a similar posture. As for the

courtier, there was little enough of him in the Mérimée of a certain evening, when a chance flatterer, watching the hostess serenely and happily acquitting herself of her duties, blazing with diamonds and laughing round to a ring of companions and statesmen and men of talent, asked her if she felt that there was anything in the world left to desire. "Very little", came the answer. "Yes,—one thing would overbrim my cup of good fortune—to see M. Mérimée converted." The salt in the wound, even sprinkled from that quarter, stung too sharply. "Always these personal remarks, Madame!" And he turned sourly away.

No less significant of the true relations existing between the sovereigns and their "jester" are his encounters with Napoleon III. Mérimée, whose faith in the qualities of adventures is really restricted to his novels, had welcomed the news of the Coup d'Etat, we have seen, with a very guarded hopefulness. But the persistence of the apparently vague and slow-deciding Emperor, in leading Eugénie de Montijo to the altar in the face of the massed forces of envy and tradition, had drawn from him an observation that sounded indeed like a concession. "Decidedly, he is beginning to show something of Caesar." Was the dictator, so ardently desired during the sickening chaos of '48, uprisen at last for the salvation of an unworthy people? Gradually, as the sky clouded with the threat of French intervention in Italy, and the Emperor, after seeming the one man in the kingdom who inclined to war, shone out suddenly as the interpreter of a bellicose nation's will in the flare of an inexplicable Gallic burst of enthusiasm, Mérimée forgot to think of him merely as a "perfect gentleman"

who never failed in civility and tact. "I begin to know the inflexibility of your son-in-law", he wrote to Mme de Montijo. "He has an incredible sensitiveness in perceiving the odd fluctuations of feeling in this country." The victories of the quixotic Italian campaign set the seal on his admiration, and his eulogies became flowery. "I have always thought the art of war is quickly learned, that a man of genius is always a great captain; witness Caesar." He could find it easy to forgive him for not "seeing his way clearly in the Italian question from 1860 onwards"; as for Italian unity, when it became a *fait accompli*, it leapt to the eyes that it bore more than a little resemblance to the revolution of '48. "It came about automatically, furthered less by the talent of Italian statesmen than by the follies of its adventurers and its waifs and strays."

For we note that by the time Garibaldi came on the scene, his *penchant* for the Zampas and Fra Diavolos of this world had faded altogether away; perhaps the new outlaw forfeited his approval by making for too political a goal in spite of his army's melodramatic progress! and where politics were concerned, Mérimée's declining years only confirmed him in his view, that, to stem the tide of utter disorder (and he threw the march of the Sicilian army into this category), the iron decision of the benevolent tyrant alone was of any service. France seemed to have found one. Mérimée could not cherish any illusions on the score of the opposition's strength; Orleanists, Legitimists, Socialists, they were but awaiting a false move to drag this reincarnation of the hated Legend down from the throne he had usurped. But

while the charm held, and the glamour of heroism surrounded the liberator of Piedmont, he supported Napoleon with a whole heart; and in after days, he must have rejoiced to have paid him at this time a homage more precious than words. The complete disappearance from the Tuileries papers (handed over to the Emperor's heirs after being examined by the authorities of the Third Republic) of any notes or memoranda pertaining to Mérimée's life of Caesar, have cast an irremediable doubt on its existence. After the years of comparing the Roman generallissimo's bald head with that of Morny's, his nose to Wellington's nose, his early fortunes with those of Barbès, of writing to correspondents in Dalmatia to find out what was the plant growing there that had sustained the Caesarian armies, of traversing the site of Gergovia with the *Commentaries* in his hand, must we believe that no finished manuscript on this burning subject had ever lain on Mérimée's desk? That the long delay which followed his reception at the Académie Française, when M. Etienne, his "recipient" spoke admiringly of the two completed panels of the triptych Mérimée was known to be engaged on, is explained by his unwillingness to hurry over what he dreamed of making the crown of his literary career, the third panel? or that, deterred by the difficulties of satisfying his own taste, he never began it? Certainly, the Imperial amateur, who many times remained until the small hours at Compiègne, discussing Vercingetorix with those who were willing to listen, after spending the afternoon bent over the ruins of the Roman villa unearthed not far from the little town, must have had recourse

to Mérimée's known acquaintance with the great man idolized by both of them. For Mérimée, Caesar had the triple attraction of the man who had it in him to be "amorous to madness", who collected cameos, who was a superb artist in war. "*Un fort mauvais drôle*", he had begun by being; "he would have become an honest man, if he had been spared." We are justified in supposing that the Caesar who would have lived, who might have quietened down to a sincere love of the republic, become a first-class democrat, would have found in Mérimée a less sympathetic historian, and one always regretting that he had not ripened into the ideal of the benevolent tyrant.

Whether or no it was this democratic tendency of Caesar's last years which discouraged Mérimée, the absence of the manuscript makes it once and for all futile to guess. But we know that, even when he placed the resources of his well-furnished brain at the Emperor's disposal, he attempted to discourage him from carrying his purpose through, advised him on the appearance of his suggestive preface to the Life, to go no further than the suggestions. And yet, this did not prevent him from spending one of the most delightful days of his life, renewing his adored researches in the Emperor's company, going over the supposed emplacement of Alesia[1]; what was more, when he saw that his own misgivings were not shared by the resolute author, he made it a point, not of honour, but of pleasure, as he would have done for Ampère or Lenormant or Panizzi, to make a *résumé* of his own knowledge, and to contribute it to the work. The Emperor, as wary

[1] Alise Sainte-Reine.

and free of illusions as the novelist himself, offered to pay him for his services the sum he would choose to ask. But Mérimée proved a very Diogenes. "Sire, I have at home all the necessary books. I have calculated that with a dozen goose-quills and a bottle of Petite Vertu (?) ink, I shall be quite equal to the task. Your Majesty will, I hope, permit me to make him this present." The Emperor smiled, incredulous as are all men in power; but Mérimée quite forgot to ask for any return. In his complex nature, that element of calculating interest was not to be found; it was not only that nothing seemed worth asking for. Napoleon had to content himself with a grateful remembrance of this rare piece of forgetfulness.

We can, if we wish, read into this nonchalant transference of the fruit of long researches into the hands of another worker yet another sign of Mérimée's growing detachment from the literary activities of the time. Save for the frank exposure to the public of the scandalous little pamphlet *H.B.*, which had been circulated *sub rosa* among Beyle's friends, and now appeared shorn of its offending passages, Mérimée had not been able or found the heart to write anything between 1846 and 1860 that recalled the colour and the rich life of *Colomba* and *Carmen*. His funeral tribute to the man who had been a true friend and more of a guide than he had realized, partakes of that general *Ave atque Vale* which he had begun to bid to what he considered as his past follies. In 1852, to read over the dead Stendhal's correspondence was like a rejuvenating draught. The expurgated article published in 1855 stands to the memory of that curiously mistrustful and yet firm friendship like the

column on the plain of Austerlitz, simple and dignified and fraught with associations made dearer by the monotony of the days that had succeeded it. "A departure, a death should be masked with a certain ceremony, for there is always something grave in them. . . . What is demanded is that which Elpenor begged for; not only a handful of earth, but a commemoration." And he called up for that small group of devoted contemporaries the figure that still charms all who love literature and life, and especially a strong blend of both—"Henri Beyle, Milanese".

The droll contradictions, the basic impulsiveness, the caprices, the sallies, the absolute originality, not a trait is missing. "Beyle, original in everything (a real merit in these days of colourless characters), made a boast of being a liberal, and at the bottom of his heart, he was a complete aristocrat. He could not bear fools; people who bored him filled him with a furious hate, and all his life he could never make a clear distinction between a bore and a malignant person. He displayed a profound contempt for the French character. . . frivolity, light-headedness inconsequence in thought and deed. In reality, he possessed the same defects to an advanced degree . . . All his life he was ruled by his imagination, and abruptness and enthusiasm dictated his every action. In spite of this he prided himself on doing nothing that did not conform to reason. "In everything, one must be guided by la *logique*", he would say . . . but his impatience found it difficult to bear that the logic of other people was not his own. . . . Always preaching *amour-goût*, he was extremely capable of *amour-passion*. . . . I have always seen

him either in love or imagining he was in love. . . ." And Mérimée goes over the whole range of Beyle's idiosyncrasies, his horror of rhetoric and poetry, the examples he would give of the true military eloquence (we remember *L'Enlèvement de la Redoute*), his ideas on the somewhat alarming advances that were every woman's due, his ignorance of architecture and his literary way of judging a picture, his cult of the Italian opera, his mania for pseudonyms, his obsession of a police constantly listening at the keyhole or breaking open letters, his inconsistent verdicts on Napoleon; and he closes with these prophetic words: "I picture to myself some twentieth century critic discovering Beyle's books in the rubbish of the nineteenth century (!), and according them the reputation they never won among his contemporaries." Beyle had always felt this, had himself declared that the perspective of time was indispensable for a proper view of him and his talent. But even without the captivating details of this strange man's composition, is it difficult, after those opening words of Mérimée's study, to perceive the inevitable attraction that drew and held them together? And looking back on their two lives, must not Mérimée have felt a deep-buried longing to exchange the penetration of his intelligence for one grain of that laughable and yet so pleasant illogicality that he analysed with such reverent care?

This pamphlet, then, breathing with a life infused by the very liveliness of its subject, had few rivals indeed in its author's literary creations during what we may call his decadence. All those stilted treatises and reviews, the arid wastes of *Don Pèdre* (not made

more refreshing by the writer's dubbing of him a Spanish Haroun-el-Raschid), the dry portraits of Brantôme, Don Carlos, and Froissart might well be left, in their conscientious utility, to swell the pile of nineteenth century rubbish out of which the phoenix Stendhal was to rise. The Russian vignettes alone strike our fancy. Even now, when Russian art and literature have become part of everyone's intellectual stock-in-trade, Mérimée's reconstitution of the splendours and the brutalities of the Russian 17th century have not only the merit of being the first look cast at them by a French historian. His account of the reign of Boris Godounov and the impostors who succeeded him and plunged the country into a sea of anarchy and bloodshed, is written in the impersonal, colourless way that he persisted in believing to be the only manner suited to history; it makes us long for the original chronicles, and envious of his ability to read them. But when he busies himself with moulding out of them and painstakingly setting up before us what has till then remained a formless shadow, the last of his Outlaws, the impostor Demetrius, he finds again some vestige of his old cunning; the figure, set in relief by that form of dramatic narrative in dialogue which he and the *cénâcle* had once imagined capable of renewing the drama, leaves an impression on the mind which is not only due to the 'local colour' and the exotic wildness of the country he is evoking.

Whoever has listened to the music-drama of Moussorgsky and remembers the background of pale birches, the crowd, blacker against the snow, of the melancholy, hopeful Russians, raising their

hands in supplication to the handsome young Pretender, and the song of the idiot accompanying the progress of the excited mob, mooning away on "Holy Russia, Holy Russia!" and weeping as he beats his saucepan, must not expect to rediscover in *Les Débuts d'un Aventurier*, still less in *Les Faux Démétrius*, that cold rendering of the cold facts, any of the reasonless, brooding mysticism which makes of that tableau something redolent of a country never yet understood. But Yourii the Cossack (for Mérimée has decided that Demetrius was an intelligent Cossack of the Dnieper) who by virtue of a chance resemblance to the son of Ivan the Terrible passes himself off for the Tsarevitch murdered by Boris, and sets light to the fuse of revolt which will blow the Godounov family from the throne—there is an aureole of youth and intrepidity round him which Mérimée hardly ever contrived to set round the heads of any of his favourites in history. We follow him from the dying hour of the old Cossack who hands over to him the baptismal cross of the child he had been made to slaughter, through his first declaration of his royal origin to Choubine, the merchant of Ouglitch, up till his masterly capture of Prince Mniszek's household by his horsemanship and his air of distinction; in spite of the old lack of true vitality in this reconstitution of a forgotten adventure, we are charmed by confidence of this young athlete, precipitating himself for love of risk into the jaws of the Unknown. He is but the protagonist in a vigorous but faded tableau of primitive times; yet he leads head and shoulders above the monks and princes, and his fearlessness is worth dwelling on.

With his translation, done in 1849, of Pushkin's *Queen of Spades*, Mérimée, having ingeniously shifted the business of invention on to the Russian novelist's shoulders, had enhanced his own reputation, but this time in an indirect fashion of which he was perhaps not himself aware. For to read Pushkin's rapid tale, ornamented with much of the Byronic stucco though it is—irony, a touch of the macabre, pistols and the rest of it—is to realize at once that in tone and style it approaches the ideal of the *nouvelle* as Mérimée conceived it more than any work written before or since. Less curt, more full-bodied, and impregnated with a sinister perfume that only a Russian writer can transfuse into a story, it exhibits, nevertheless, the same disdain of useless detail, the same taste for action of a gratuitous violence; its scene is the world of society, where the temptations are the stronger for the artificial constraint, and for each man's desire to procure for himself intense emotions without upsetting the house of cards. That Mérimée must have been aware of this kinship is proved by his article on Pushkin, written twenty years later than this first presentation of his genius to French readers. In it, we see how easily he moved on the familiar ground; Pushkin, himself in revolt against the restrictions of the Tsarist régime, had, like Byron, opened his career with an anti-religious poem. "Both are distinguishable by their concision. . . . Full of a haughty misanthropy, of a disgust for the conventions of society, they are both somewhat inclined to exaggeration; they are always in quest of the extraordinary, they consider beautiful whatever is excessive or terrible. . . ." This is written of Byron

and Pushkin; Mérimée might well join them to form a triad were it not for his instinctive reserve. He goes on to criticise Pushkin's error in treating with too little seriousness the terrifying legends he culled among the Russian peasants; the writer of *La Vénus d'Ille* had early mastered the formula for inspiring fear. Pushkin interrupts the narrative to scatter a few reflections, *La Chronique de Charles IX* has its dialogue between author and reader; Pushkin has written a historical drama, *Boris Godounov*, as well as the history of Pougatchew, a Cossack impostor of the 18th century; Mérimée has poached on the same preserves. And, in our surprise at being confronted with a Merimée enthusiastic about poetry, we remember suddenly that there once appeared, in that joyful time of Romantic fooling, a collection of poems in prose named *La Guzla*. "*Des Bohémiens, troupe vagabonde, vont errant en Bessarabie. Aujourd'hui, au bord du fleuve, ils campent sous leurs tentes déchirées. Douce comme l'indépendance est leur nuitée. Qu'on dort bien a la belle étoile!*" A translation from the original poem of Hyacinthe Maglanovitch? "Simplicity of the legend, ingenious choice of details, a marvellous restraint in the execution." Pushkin—or Mérimée?

The story of the lieutenant who feigns a passion for the companion of an old countess, in order to worm his way into her house and force her to reveal the secret of the three cards (learned from the Comte de Saint Germain during her youth in Paris), which never fail to win at the tables, the death of the old lady from terror, the revelation of the secret by her ghost, and the failure of the trick which proves that

she has revenged herself, fascinated Mérimée, as it well might, for it is a masterpiece. In Gogol, it was doubtless the irony, so fine in *The Queen of Spades*, here so bitter and slashing in *Dead Souls* and *The Inspector*, which caught his fancy. He could cordially approve of Gogol's caricatures excited by the world's *bêtise*; concerning the Russian's manner, he makes the reserves we should expect, affiliates him to Rabelais and to Balzac, cannot reconcile himself to the boisterous disorder in the construction. The richness of the comedy he finds somewhat indigestible; but the humour of *The Inspector* inspired him to translate it, even while he shrank delicately from the too raw delineation of the baseness that had always shocked him in the common humanity. In reality, Mérimée was too personal to admit of any other reaction to that baseness but a stonier resignation, a faint and polite shrug—in other words, his own. When he claims in his essay on Gogol, that "the mind tires in the reading of these brilliant pages", that "the art of selecting among the innumerable traits set before us by nature is, after all, much more difficult than that of noting them attentively and reproducing them with fidelity", it is not only the the stricture of the super-refined artist on a work overflowing with sap and vitality; it is the stiff protest of one who has long taken refuge in the aloofness of the dandy, and not even deigned to find stupidity entertaining through a quizzing-glass. And his words go a long way to explain why among his critical studies not a page is to be found wherein he devotes more than the briefest of remarks to the *Comédie Humaine*.

If Pushkin retained him by many resemblances

and the cord of memory to the thoughtless time of his plundering in the Romantic orchards, Tourguenev, although their acquaintance dated back to the 'thirties, meant a precious link with the generation that had grown up almost unperceived by him, and whose excesses were as distasteful to him as those of Hugo or Charles Nodier. Writing on him two years before his death, Mérimée began: "Tourguenev has been cited as one of the heads of the realist school. Whether this be a criticism or a eulogy, I consider that he belongs to no school at all; he follows his own inspirations. Like all good novelists, he has devoted himself to the study of the human heart, that mine which remains inexhaustible, although it has been so long exploited." To class a novelist of such impeccable technique as belonging to the tribe of long-winded and vulgar blunderers like Flaubert (it must not be forgotten that Mérimée, although he credited Flaubert with a vague talent, preferred to *Salammbo*, *La Cuisine Française*) was an insult that Mérimée could not stomach. It was not wilful blindness, but an incapacity arising out of the increasing narrowness of his artistic beliefs which prevented him from realising that Flaubert and Tourguenev, Zola and the de Goncourts all descended from the first novelist to style himself "student of the human heart". So Tourguenev appealed to him by a genius for style which Stendhal had lacked, by an economy of observation which would have conferred on *Madame Bovary* perfection in his eyes, by his avoidance of the "great questions that agitate our modern society", and in particular by his love of truth and an exquisite sense of psychology.

For Mérimée's aversion to a big canvas, his ingrained preference for the "cameo" remained with him to the end. Though "the progress of civilization tends to efface violence from the society of to-day", that is no excuse to paint immense frescoes of the mob or the *bourgeoisie*; for progress "has not been able to change the passions concealed in the human heart", and the only bourgeois of interest is the one "who before entering on a suit for divorce, endures all the spiritual tortures felt by Othello before he strangled Desdemona". And so essential does this unique and concentrated occupation seem to him —the composition of the *drame intime*, with a few happily chosen details—that he rebukes Tourguenev for being led away by the flexibility and richness of the Russian tongue into useless descriptions, landscape-painting that clogs the action; *Smoke* strikes him as admirable, for there "the happily chosen details contribute to the development of the characters and prepare the dramatic situation". No; Mérimée is incorrigible; the age stretches away from him, enriched with the abundant watering of a hundred various streams, and he stays obstinately by the thin, crystal rivulet that gave them all birth.

So the Mask takes on a more rigid remoteness; the study of the past arouses no emotion, the present is not changed from its state of deplorable, but diverting peepshow; as for the future, *impavidum ferient ruinae*, and it is best to set the features now, in preparation for the cataclysm that cannot be distant. In the meantime, a little verbal sport with Amaryllis in the shade, a little scribbling, just to bid farewell to a pursuit which, retrospectively, has brightened many

hours, travel and public appearances, all this gone through with an old-fashioned punctiliousness—Mérimée's life is filled, and he does not demand more. He will dine quietly at Saint Cloud, and come away pleased from finding the atmosphere less *popish*, and having been allowed to lash out freely at the imbecility of things; or in the summer at Fontainebleau, he will sit at the feet of the fair Mme Przezdziecka, the Polish Queen of the Court of Love which he and a few kindred spirits, reconciled to the enforced refinement brought by age, have founded in order to satisfy their inactive desires with embroidering on the eternal theme, to warm the cockles of their hearts with a *marivaudage* that they hope will start an answering beat in those of the seated dames, the floral array of pale crinolines and Leghorn straw-hats spread out before them. From the furthest end of the lake comes a ripple of laughter, a delighted scream of protest, a refrain of Offenbach. It is the Baby-Club at its games, the youth of the day cultivating the most modern of discussions, the sprightliest of garbs and graces. Mérimée emits some sly piece of sententiousness, or a compliment impeccably turned; his cosmos is empty of youth; the universe has had none pass through it, since Tortoni ousted the Café Anglais and the art of living and conversing was stamped out, and the *Figaro* with its ready-made opinions and stray facts set up in its place.

But either the wind from the steppes he has been traversing in thought with Stenka Razine or Bogdan Chmielnicki and the flying horseman with the knives in their teeth, or, likelier, a breath of the

Polish charm laden with the scents of his youth, has blown on the embers, and a small fitful flame has awoken. Quickly, before "the monument" claims him, before the bronchitis and the asthma send him gasping out of the circle of frills and white shoulders, out of everything, he must write one more story. And in the evening, while the lamplight ambers the graceful arching neck of the Empress, and puts an alluring glow on the low-dressed hair of the younger listeners, with their heads bent over the embroidery frame or raised to the reader's expressionless face, Mérimée reads *Lokis*. When the uniform, almost severe tones have died away, the silence broken by a few tentative murmurs seems to cause the author a certain irritated surprise; elderly authors are so touchy! Mérimée shuffles the manuscript together, and walks with a stiff dignity up to M. Filon, the Prince Imperial's Tutor. "Did you understand? No, you have not understood—*bien*", and he leaves the words of justification frozen on M. Filon's lips. We, if we understand (as M. Filon doubtless did, but remembering he was a courtier put on a non-committal expression), can appreciate the tepid welcome given to that last flare of invention. It was the prolonged brooding over the life and manners of Northern Europe that must have borne this fruit, for the tale is situated in Lithuania; but Mérimée, if he revealed once again his tastes and tendencies, the background of learning, the mystery, the brutal action, the cold recounting of tragedy, seems to have subordinated his desire to please by a faultless execution and a thrilling story to that old besetting sin—the fun of bamboozling and shocking his auditor. The time and the place were oddly

chosen. It is true that the Empress had provoked him to the attempt; for she had been reading some risky tales by a naval officer, and she had cast a doubt on her civilian Jester's ability to glide so elegantly over thin ice. Mérimée's ice is thin indeed, and we cannot help feeling that he deserved to put one foot through it, as M. Filon's blank look shewed him he had done.

As for the story, the careful dosing of the correct elements — exotic surroundings, anxiety, terror, shock, mockery, doubt—is too patent for us not to detect the taste of each, and *La Venus d'Ille* has the advantage over it of being "understandable". One day, out hunting in the Lithuanian forests, the Countess Szemioth, separated from her companions, finds herself face to face with a bear. She is not mauled, but faints away, and when she recovers, she has lost her reason. A son born some months after the incident grows up to manhood, and at last brings home a bride. The morning after the wedding night, the Count has disappeared and the girl is found in her bed horribly mutilated, the cause of her death being the quite evident *bites* that disfigure her body. The scrupulous Mérimée had not omitted, we are told, to consult a number of learned doctors before embarking on this tale. But alas! we can "understand" or be baffled, choose the version that physiology would reject or admit; the problem is not burning enough; for the author's glacial presentment of it has quenched its interest and Lithuania, too, is a land of icicles, its remoteness has smudged the narrative and its events, and by the time we ask ourselves what he "meant", we have forgotten the subject.

*La Chambre Bleue*, published after his death cannot restore credit to this last dash for fame. As if desirous of making the ring of listeners smaller than ever, he dedicated it to the Empress and under the name of "Madame de la Rhune", setting a happy aura round it by this evocation of the informal days at Biarritz. But these auspices did not confer merit on it; it remains a drawing-room *conte bleu* and its eloping couple, terrified at the sight of a crimson liquid creeping under the door of the hotel room next to theirs and relieved to find that their neighbour had merely been closeted with a bottle of red wine, only make us think what de Maupassant, never averse to treating incidents of the kind, would have made out of it. And we see that Mérimée is lost without the *exceptional* country or the *exceptional* circumstance, that his characters are denied life because their actions alone and not their personality absorb him now, and he haughtily refuses to give us time to discover the latter, for we ought to be intelligent enough to gauge them from the former. So reluctantly we leave him, without any new laurels to encircle his grey hair, paying court to his Polish Queen, applauding discreetly at the charades of Mme Metternich, complimenting a *lionne* on her travesty for the fancy-dress dance, initiating Jules Sandeau into the mysteries of Court dress and its buckles, while he coughs and groans and snivels, and prays that the winter at Cannes may be more clement than last year and the Englishwomen on the Croisette not more absurdly clothed. For history may stimulate him, but he represses with an iron severity the ardours it inspires; when he would turn to imagination, two formidable figures, Colomba

and Carmen, dark and implacable as in an engraving of Felicien Rops, seem to guard jealously the narrow enclosure of his fame, and bar the way, infernal angels, to any new creature of his invention. There remains for him but the resigned chronicle of passing events, and to rise with the surge of a dynasty's fortunes, to fall, stoically, with its fall.

For in the brilliant crescendo of the Second Empire, Mérimée's plaintive hautbois pursues the line traced out for it in the score, here and there supplying an obbligato to some gay or heroic strain, merged dutifully in the sonority of the movement which leads up to the glorious *Allegro Molto*, only to sink after a clangour of brass into the grim *Adagio Lamentoso*, the funeral march blared out by the full orchestra; and on the last swelling chord of despair, his mournful and yet ever-individual note fades into silence with the rest. The letters to Panizzi, which form his running commentary on all that most nearly touched the crises suffered by his country during the last twelve years of the Empire with their successive domination and passing, recover for us much of the attractive wit and smoothness of his early works, besides revealing his acuteness of judgment, extraordinary even in one perpetually admitted to the private view of the vicissitudes and intrigues in politics. If there is a pathos in the gradual dying out of the playful vein which gives much of his correspondence an inimitable turn that sticks in the mind, we can rally all our faltering admiration to the swiftness of his ranging pen, his comprehension of each move in the game, the racy tone he maintains and his phlegmatic

stoicism. For even if the game is a losing one, there is an armour for him to buckle on against fortune's slings and arrows. As years go by, he tires of English hypocrisy, English food, English muteness; but that curious Anglo-Saxon invention, the blank front presented to all comers and circumstances, which some take for cunning, some for stupidity, others for insolence—that is worth acquiring. As M. Filon watched him coming along the path in the grounds of Fountainebleau, this "old gentleman, *soigné* in his dress, even coquettish; grey trousers, white waistcoat, spreading sky-blue tie, of an old-fashioned cut, a big nose, square at the end, of a curious shape, a deep cross of four wrinkles ploughed into the forehead, a round eye, cold and a little hard, overshadowed by a thick eyebrow", behind the twinkle of pince-nez, the general bearing, "very stiff", he had said to himself: "Probably an English diplomat". But it was Mérimée. The new Mask worked to perfection.

So we follow his dignified but irregular course, from the opening of the Italian Wars, when the Emperor stands out precisely drawn between the two pillars of his policy; "upholder of the old treaties, and protector of the free will of nations in the decision of their government". Montebello has raised the public enthusiasm to fever point. "Even the salons are behaving properly. A great number of rich young men have joined the Army, and the legitimists say that whatever happens, the flag must be defended." Prussia is roused to a real anxiety ("the rage of the Franzosenfresser is very great"); but since the *rapprochement* with Russia at the Congress of

Paris, not only has disapproval of this new Napoleonic flight of eagles been out of the question, but, according to Tourguenev, the whole Russian army "burns to fight against the Austrians". Lord Palmerston on the eve of becoming Foreign Minister is suspected of favouring the Italian cause; at all events, "it is very important that even while remaining neutral, the British Government should shew itself sympathetic to the allies." The eagles sweep triumphantly through a cloudless sky; Mérimée refuses an invitation to Madrid; Vienna brought the Crimean news to him more quickly than Paris, but Spain is the country of false rumours; there remains but Paris, the hearth of hopes and agitations.

And then one by one the clouds move up into the European horizon, and the first drops fall. Magenta—a splendid folly of bayonets, a sublime disregard for the utility of bullets; the Emperor calmly exposing himself to the danger. "Now that it's over, that's very well; but he must certainly not make a habit of it." Then, as little by little, Rome is revealed as the distant goal, the balance of power quivers disturbingly with the weight of the conflicting parties and claims. "The French Catholics become restless and hold forth against an impious war": it is true that the "government has never been more accommodating", while public opinion remains excellent. After Solferino, a bloody field which sickened the heart of Napoleon III, the fatal hesitations begin. "If, as I hope, we achieve the deliverance of Italy and can give her national government, we can return home with the satisfaction of people who have toiled well."

But Mérimée's whole-heartedness wilts before the calculations. To organise the Italian Federation, that's the devil; who is to have the Legations? and Venetia? Villafranca stems the tide of the war's popularity in France; if Venetia is to remain under Austrian control, and the Pope to keep a semblance of authority as "honorary president", even though the word "Independence" has been manfully brandished in everyone's face, why did the eagles set out? For the menaces from outside are not visible to the man in the street, the fear of setting the spark to revolutions in Austria-Hungary, the jealousy of Prussia, the play of Italian interests, manifested in the diminished zeal of the Italian armies, the ill-tempered criticisms of England, who persists in taking the eagles for vultures, and has a German prince at the fountain-head of opinion. With the frank aid of Lord Palmerston, and a slapdash French admiral to storm Venice and knock to pieces the Campanile, things might have been otherwise. As it is, the Milanese bookshops are displaying portraits of Orsini, and the soldiers of Solferino return, furiously accusing the Piedmontese peasants of being Austrians. Mérimée retires to Cannes in high dudgeon. "One never downs a priest, one can only reduce him by silence and famine. I regret the success of the Saint Bartholomew, and the abjuration of Henri IV. . . . If, my dear Panizzi, you could only send the Pope a little cholera, you would pull a grievous thorn out of our foot." The hated Idol looms larger than ever over the disturbed horizons of his declining days. The Romans are "condemned to be eternally the Pope's domestics. . . . You and I are now obliged

to give so much a year to our Holy Father. In my opinion, we should be left to the natural impulses of our generosity. We should not fail to proportion our largesse to the advantages we could draw from the Roman Catholic Church."

At Cannes, the only monarch who now counts for much, the sun, graciously receives him; in spite of the frost, he trots over the hills with the governesses, and loses his stomach-aches. In the warm retreat, he resumes his mockery of things terrestrial, the Bishop of Orléans who has written a pamphlet declaring his intention of returning to the catacombs, the election of the Abbé Lacordaire to the Academy. Lord Brougham, at 82, rushes back to England to make his speech in the Lords; the Neapolitans are projecting an invasion of the Romagna; Pio Nono has sent him a rheumatism in the left hip. But this "liberty to blow on whom he pleases" is not of long duration; Paris constantly recalls him, and in spite of his grumbling, his curiosity wins him back to seriousness as he re-enters the arena. The annexation of Savoy displeases him by the manner of its accomplishment; the fury expressed in the English papers has made it as acceptable to the French people as the war had been. As for England, he declares to Panizzi that she must lie on the bed she has made, with her Parliament full of timid and selfish manufacturers. "To-day she finds herself repulsed by Austria and feebly welcomed by the Italians. Since the Crimea, she has lost much of her prestige."

But, if he condemns the attitude of the onlookers, he is no less implacable towards what he takes to be flaccidity that is creeping into his own country. The pious Lamoricière has made "a gross

blunder and shamefully given the lie to his past reputation" in taking command of the Papal volunteers; he is at daggers drawn, too, with the Cardinal Antonelli, "that wily and unscrupulous prelate; they should have sent a Corsican to spar with him; you know that Seneca accuses them of *negare Deos*." His old Orleanist friends, Thiers, Guizot, even Cousin, have chosen to administer a cuff to the Empire and its warlike escapades by voting for the Catholic Lacordaire at the Academy—not that their "absurd palinode" has had any other effect than to renew the Emperor's popularity among the people. And his exasperation grows, for the security of the régime he has put his whole faith in begins to be compromised. The days are heavy with suspense. "I feel I am looking on at a great dramatic spectacle; so great, that one never knows whether one act is not a whole play in itself." The rising in the South of Italy will be general in a year, unless the Austrians hazard a fresh offensive. In Venice, people are literally dying of hunger; all the hotels are closed. To appoint him Secretary of the Senate is in no way to check his watchfulness, for it is "a post remarkably like the fifth wheel in a coach"; it represents merely an extra nuisance. He protests that neither France nor England has had a finger in Garibaldi's latest piece of effrontery. "Here, the only person who is interested in his expedition is myself . . . it pleases me, for I like novels and adventures." But the Emperor is enraged, for he was proposing to evacuate Rome in a month, and now he is caught "between hammer and anvil"; and, really, "it is a gloomy enough thought that the hero of a novel can set fire

to Europe." And the Oriental question will only bring fresh dirt on to the tapis. M. de Thouvenel has put it in a nutshell. "Imagine to yourself", he has said, "several *capita mortua* one on top of the other. The Greeks and Bulgarians are greater muck than the Turks. One ought to begin by wiping out the lot of them and founding a colony of respectable people." The European statesmen vie with each other in thinking out insults; but there will be no war, because a sufficient excuse is not to be found; and John Bull's excitement has begun to die down, although Lord Palmerston tries still to set up in everyone's mind the bogey of a French invasion on English shores. Mérimée does not deny "that France is ambitious. It is a national idea, or rather, a national prejudice that she suffered a diminution of herself in losing part of the conquests of the Revolution I think the Emperor does not share this prejudice; but in any case, even if he did, you can't imagine him so devoid of common sense as to risk bringing down all Europe on him."

Panizzi, all subtlety and *finesse*, probably saw eye to eye with his correspondent; but Mérimée's visit to England in 1860 undeceived him with regard to John Bull's belief in the danger. "I have made the acquaintance of a fine gentleman of 76, who every day parades in zouave's breeches." The volunteers strike him as even more ridiculous than the *garde-nationale* of 1830, on account of the serious air which the English assume over their occupations. In Scotland, at Glenquoich, Ellice's country house, he forgets the oriental dung-heap for a moment, while sacrificing his skin to the midges of Invernesshire, and going for

" beautiful walks " in rain as thick as an army's lances. But, no sooner home again, he renews his gallant defence of the Empire's moderation, protests, as if he had himself been holding the strings of power, that France has only thrown herself into action because she is unable to look on like her neighbour; are not the army's effectives being stringently reduced? Is it thinkable that the Sick Man of Europe can recover, any more than that France has moved a step towards pushing him into his grave? There is something infinitely attractive in this dignified pleading, no less than in the absence of bitter partisanship in either of the two commentators on the march of events.

By the end of 1860, a colourless calm has been reached, the calm of temporization, with the cats' eyes from all quarters riveted on the Papal mouse. The Mazzinists are energetically plotting to send a man to Paris disguised as a wounded campaigner of Solferino; his crutch will be a gun, and the Emperor will be neatly removed out of the way to freedom. As for the prospective victim, his nebulous gaze does not lighten up; he stares Sphinxlike into the future, and his advisers must be remembering the declaration of the Princess Mathilde, who, after her engagement to her Napoleonic cousin was broken off, expressed a mild relief—" for ", said she, " I should have wanted to break open his head every day, to see what there was in it." He talks long of Caesar and ancient history with his " Jester "; the Empress, pale and sad from the death of her lovely sister, the Duchesse d'Albe, tells him of a Corsican bandit who has been emulating the exploits of Orso della Rebbia.

The king of Naples is ensconced in Gaeta, Garibaldi quiet like a replete spider. But Lamoricière's discomfiture at Castelfidardo gives everyone reason to think that Victor Emmanuel will be galvanised into swift movement; and the spectacle of Cavour with his two hounds straining at the leash heightens the anxiety.

Gradually, in spite of the cryptic blankness of the *maître de la maison*, it is seen that the enterprise so bravely set in motion must be left to continue on its own impetus, without a reinforcement from France. Lamoricière's capitulation at Ancona has obliterated his unpopularity and merely rankles as a setback to French arms; the bourgeois will not countenance a further alliance with "a people who have Garibaldi for active leader"; the priests, the women and the fashion are always to be reckoned with. The Knight-Errant of 1859 stays at home and puts his own house in order. Mérimée watches him, full of the deepest misgivings, paying court to the Chamber. "These new liberal concessions seem to me of the strangest, and I see in them a cause of anxiety for the future." But the address from the Throne is nevertheless handed over to the harpies of discussion; for how otherwise worm out of the parliamentarians a sincere opinion on the Italian crisis? If they talk of the Address, they will also give out their decree that no further part had better be taken in Italian affairs, and with a clear conscience, the Emperor can recall Goyon and the troops from Rome, and show an untroubled front to Europe. And Mérimée groans inwardly, as he hears—or thinks he hears—the roll of the revolutionary drums nearing the capital, those drums already imperatively beaten

in Central Europe. Garibaldi himself he sees through these new black glasses. "He has all the qualities which go to make a revolutionary, even that of real foolishness and of becoming the instrument of the most detestable rogues." *Tout va à la diable, partout* . . . . The new edition of Pushkin's works, containing among the lyrical poems, "magnificent things altogether such as I love, that is to say, Greek in their truth and simplicity", does not console him; for it can but put an uglier tinge, by contrast, on the confusion and blunders that surround him.

He busies himself in the winter with trying to build up at Cannes a kind of epicurean colony, a refuge against the evil day that cannot be far distant: Cousin, Ellice with his gout, Fould, a ministerial *gourmet*, they must all join him and drink perdition to the Pontiff in the Bordeaux he fetches over from Marseilles. But once again, he must bestir his basking limbs; the Senate, this time, reminds him that his secretaryship is not the ideal sinecure he would desire it to be; and the capital summons him once more. At least, he has the consolation of chuckling over the burning of his books in the church square of Grasse by a priest of the purest orthodoxy, and to have been thus martyrised in the company of MM. Thiers and Mignet. "I considered the notion a good one, and should have liked Father . . . to have his imitators; it would have obliged my publisher to reprint my works and nourish the flames with them. Thiers said it was a bad beginning, and that from the books to their authors the distance is not great. The worthy father is in difficulties at the moment; he has been caught in a carriage in a woman's arms."

But in 1861, Paris is "stupider" than ever. An evil demon propels Mérimée to throw a mild bomb into a highly reactionary Senate by defending an appeal of Mme. Libri, the crooked librarian's wife, for the revision of her husband's trial. After making the most cold and impersonal of speeches it is not surprising that the Senate feel themselves disinclined to reverse their predecessors' pronouncement, and the final blow is administered by the revelation made before all the disapproving assembly that M. Libri had forged his father's act of decease in order to obtain his own naturalisation. As if this were not enough salt rubbed into the wound, there is no end to the animosity against Victor Emmanuel and the Nationalist cause; M. de la Rochejaquelein makes a papist discourse in the Senate so venomous that the President has to rap him over the knuckles. M. de Heeckeren, who has the death of Pushkin to his credit (for the scene of the duel in *Eugène Oneghin* had been prophetic) rises, and "with a German accent and a surly but intelligent face" delivers a violent mercurial, in which Cavour, Garibaldi, and Victor Emmanuel are all comprehended, three vile plotters, in one fell condemnation, while to the King of Naples are attributed all the generous and noble instincts he can call up. There is even a booby to be found to trace to English recommendations the idea of Italian unity. "Probably it was on the instigation of Lord Palmerston that Dante published a few bad verses on the subject, and Machiavelli a chapter of *The Prince*." Thank Heaven, the Emperor proves to the zealous Senators that their criticisms have not escaped him, by saying a few sharp and

well-chosen words at a Tuileries reception, and he at least prefers to theorize on the religion of the Romans, "in a world where people jump down your throat for nothing, for example, if you don't show all the whites of your eyes when someone mentions the 'holy martyr', and if you very innocently ask, as I did, who is being martyrized."

In the meantime he finds himself one moment in an immense majority, that of those who consider *Tannhäuser* an insult to public taste. "Some say that its performance in Paris was one of the secret conventions of Villafranca; others that we have been sent Wagner to teach us to admire Berlioz. I feel that I could write something similar to-morrow, inspiring myself with my cat walking along the keys of a piano. . . . Princess Metternich gave herself all the trouble in the world to make it appear that she understood . . . Underneath her box, they were saying that the Austrians were taking their revenge for Solferino. . . . The fiasco is tremendous!" While his friend Cousin is abruptly converted, and rumour has the audacity to pretend that Thiers also attends every mass ("I find it hard to believe, for I have always had a weakness for him"), he turns from the savages of the Senate to Stenka Razine, and gloats over the story which he is writing—a man who was hung in Moscow "after having himself hung and drowned a very considerable number of boyars and treated their wives in the Cossack way." Antiquity's the only wear. . . .

Cavour's death in June, while Mérimée is accompanying "Caesar" to Alise and digging up fine Roman swords, strikes him as "an immense event"; who

will now hold back the crazy Mazzinists and the Sicilian adventurer? At Fontainebleau, as usual, politics are ostentatiously pushed into the background; instead, the summer days have their monotony broken by the famous visit of the Siamese ambassadors. A Court painter, Gérôme, has left for us a brilliant record of the scene; Mérimée's white head glimmers discreetly—over the shoulder of a priest! Up the interminable carpet crawl the envoys in their pointed hats, on hands and knees towards the dais, where the bearded King and the beautiful White Queen, her head gracefully drooping, occidental Lotus, await them. "If you have ever seen on the Pont Neuf the sign entitled 'Au Bonjour des Chiens," you will be able to imagine the sight. The first ambassador had the hardest task. He had a felt hat embroidered with gold which shook on his head at each movement, and besides this, he was holding between his hands a golden bowl in which were two boxes, each containing a letter from their Siamese Majesties . . . When the letters had been delivered, and it was necessary to move backwards, the embassy fell into confusion. Faces came into collision with hindquarters, sword-points poked into the eyes of the second row, who in their turn were putting out those of the third. They looked like a troop of cockchafers on a carpet. The Foreign Minister had thought out this fine ceremony and insisted that the ambassadors should crawl. People think Asiatics more simple than they are; I am sure these would have made no objection had they been allowed to walk."

But, with his perennial sigh: "I have not the qualities of a courtier," Mérimée quits these

diversions after a torrid month of tight breeches, and is glad to sit down to his modest meal in Paris, though he must now tear backwards and forwards between London and his latest commission —that of the French section for the Universal Exhibition, promised in the City of Fogs for 1862. His asthma is rampant, he has recourse to ether pills, with that curious faith in medicine he shares with Morny; but the machine still holds; there is energy still dormant in it. Panizzi, who is also running about Europe doing cures, must ask the Duc d'Aumale to lend the "Death of the Duc de Guise" by Delaroche, a glory of the French school; the possessor of Ingres' "La Source" is approached with success. And then—"Come without breeches!" The telegram is from Biarritz; yet another summons! The murmur of the Atlantic, the coaching excursions into Béarn, cannot dissipate the buzzing cloud of anxieties that the interminable crisis has set up even in the Imperial household, more painful for the intimacy. Compiègne brings the Duke of Atholl and his pipers, the reels and sword-dances to alarm the ladies with their flying kilts; behind the gaiety, a ministerial tangle is being knotted and untied, faces are preoccupied and not a little strained. Cannes, more and more the sole breathing-space, is enlivened with Cousin's wit and gross appetite; violets and anemones and a thousand nameless flowers weave a chain more and more difficult to break. The Exhibition, for all its American drinks, and its beauties smothered by its size and orderless variety, does not draw the public; the jury is presided over by a "German who thinks he is talking English

and who is nearly incomprehensible to everyone".

And soon, now that the Empire is slowly descending the further slope of its brief prosperity, and the forces of the opposition massed in a more imposing array than ever, Mérimée ceases to hide his premonitions. The Empress passes for having used all her influence to bring about the Mexican venture; no matter! whoever bears the responsibility, the calamity will none the less follow, the tragi-comedy proceed implacably to its close, the yellow fever rage, and the bandits display all their cruelty. "The Mexicans have had the stupidity not to allow themselves to be beaten by a handful of Frenchmen, and now, there is not a Frenchman who dares to say that it would be better to parley with Juarez than to bombard him, a very costly pursuit." The vacancy of the Greek throne is sure to become even more than the bone of contention it has begun by being—an embryo of turmoil in that ever-fermenting quarter. By 1863, all eyes are turned northwards, but not towards a light in the sky—the Polish peasants have seen the ghost of Sobieski, and Cracow, under the eyes of Austrian sentinels, has opened a recruiting office, Polish flags and all. So he floats, resigned jetsam, on the swelling tide of the nineteenth century that is foaming irresistibly over the banks and rocks so long thought unapproachable; absently cast aside, the waters will leave him abandoned in a placid creek, to lie dull and unnoticed in the broad sunlight.

Useless then, apart from the regular chronicle, to set pen to paper with more zeal than is necessary to complete a formal *tartine* of history, to "bury" Bogdan Chmielnicki, another of his favoured

Cossacks, and to have him out of the way; still more useless to read. Victor Hugo is laid aside with not even a groan; the verdict on *him* has long been decided. "What a pity that this fellow, with such fine images at his disposition, has not a shadow of common sense! . . . He has become a man who intoxicates himself with his words and doesn't bother any longer to think." Thiers' story of the Napoleonic miracle affords some choice moments; there, at least, is a man who knows how to prune, to choose out of the mass of chaotic facts, to set up memorable figures. Tourguenev's *Fathers and Sons* might be worth devouring; it has put the whole of Russian society at loggerheads; not a bad sign. *Madame Bovary*—well, there *was* talent in it, but all obfuscated with this silly realism; as for *Salammbô*, *parfaitement fou*! On the whole, a unique phenomenon of genius—Ponson du Terrail, a novelist indeed. Emile Augier, perhaps, comes a tolerable second; *Le Fils de Giboyer* has filled the authors' purse and achieved the laudable end of making the bourgeois writhe. Renan, too, must be commended; *La Vie de Jésus* is a goodly blow of the axe at the Catholic edifice. The rest had better be silence, a silence broken by a cough or a grunt; the lumbago chimes in with the general rottenness in the state of Denmark.

But Michelet had made no mistake. "We live in times so hard that directly a tear is to be seen in any eye, everyone runs away." So, on with the dance! Let the mechanical pen and the creaking shoulders unite in an heroic effort; charade on charade, stage-manager, designer of costumes, a witticism to right

and a courteous smile to left! Let the innocent artifices dazzle the eyes, eyes that might perceive a lurid, incendiary gleam flickering over the Continent; let the carp loll aside as the gondolas and caïques part the lake's waters at Fontainebleau; let the woods return a heartier echo to the cosmopolitan chatter and the laughs hardly less frank for the presence of so many crowned puppets, before the leaves uncurl and flutter, wrinkle and drop with no one but the thrushes to follow their ripening. And the Jester, with the ground falling away beneath his feet—let him, nevertheless, fix his grimace, shake his bells, and crack his topical jokes; for a Court must have its jester. Supposing the one must endure or perish with the other? That would be the most incredible joke of all! With a certain grandeur to it, thinks the Jester. Not by a conspirator's bomb, the end had better be (they have just arrested four Italians), but by something both grave and spectacular, a battlefield, for instance, a storm to sweep away both Lear and his fool, and Lear's country and throne. With all the threats of growling cannon, the sombre finale should not be difficult to secure. The essential is, not to succumb before the grand close, with a plain death between sheets, vanquished by a lung or a limb, as with a contemptuous blow from Fate's little finger. So he will frighten away the crows of death by continuing to order Mr Poole's admirable trousers, by occupying his responsible seat in the Academy or in the Senate, and listening patiently to commentaries of an even grimmer absurdity than the events which provoke them; what if the visage above the smart coat is itself almost a skull,

the upright frame a skeleton? The world is 'stupid' enough not to notice, and certainly will not care.

Meanwhile, the scene of the climax is being laid; this drama needs no civil stage-manager; a number of knights in clanking armour have been already pressed into service. The Germans are brandishing their maces at the Danes; before long, they come heavily down; the shock of arms is too near the Rhine frontiers not to be a source of uneasiness. England is, as usual, "protesting", while the Danes complain of being abandoned by her, and desperately cling to Sleswig; France waits. But neither protests nor waiting disturb the iron calm of that massive jaw and, pitiless, brow that tops the Prussian figurehead. "No one thinks here that the affairs of Denmark can be settled before M. de Bismarck has secured the military success he covets, with which he can throw powder in the eyes of the German Parliament. Meanwhile the killing goes on in Jutland and round Duppel". *Hors d'oeuvre* for Juggernaut . . . Even when the fear of war dies down, the sight of the country's intestine confusion is not more heartening. "You know what the French become when they are not governed. In the interior, we are not governed. The prefects are under no central guidance. Some turn monk because they think to flatter the authorities, others incline to an exaggerated liberalism, imagining that there lies the future. Most of them pretend to be dead so as to keep on the right side of everyone. In the meantime, socialism makes good progress, and the *bourgeoisie*, forgetful of 1848, joins the opposition and helps to saw away the branch it is seated on." Only in England are people sure of

keeping what they possess. Mérimée himself is haunted by the idea of poverty in his old age; it is not that the grouse and ortolans and fried squid's tentacles and melons and claret have become a habit, or not *only* that, but the carcase must be held together; perhaps Panizzi, from his vantage-point, can think of a fruitful but safe investment? For he would sooner quit this globe on the instant than ask for official subsidies. *Timeo Danaos* . . . for every subsidy means a duty, and the shaken frame will not support further weights.

Slowly, with a dignity ponderous as the Second Empire chairs and their bearded occupants, the edifice crumbles. The *Moniteur* goes so far as to print the debates of a Press lawsuit, in the face of a Republican law that forbids papers to report more than the accusation and the grounds of defence. The props of the wise tyranny are being pulled away from beneath it; the silence of the Press on the exercise of discipline has been broken. M. de Bismarck is kicking right over the traces, has "thrown his Parliament out of the window". "If France and England were truly united, they would hook some fine fish in those troubled waters." But it is so long since fishing became a solitary and secretive pursuit! Lord Russell, the tactless, is engaged in treading on everyone's corns and making his name a by-word in the chanceries of Europe; "Pam" has crept into senescence with only a fierce set of false teeth to maintain an appearance of cheerful vitality. In Spain, the energy displayed by the authorities has shifted its aim; Narvaez has no bandits, but red revolutionaries to suppress. Mme de Montijo welcomes

Mérimée for the last time at Madrid in the autumn of 1864; they are coeval candidates for the shades and the "monument"; they will see the comedy through bravely, tumbrils or no tumbrils, in despite of all wars and rumours of wars. Madrid is renewing itself, its face shines with modernity; the women have taken to wearing hats. "They can no more wear a hat than a Frenchwoman a mantilla." He attends a bachelor dinner, is introduced to Pepa la Canderillera as an English bishop sent to convert the Catholics. Pepa wrings his vitals for a second with a few "traits of Andalucian ferocity" which recall his palmiest years; but "all originality is disappearing from this country." The Guadarrama is no less white, Pepa's hair of the right raven black; but the grey blight of an industrial era has breathed even on Castile. December brings a bolt from the blue of the Riviera heavens—a menace of being appointed to succeed Mocquard, the private secretary of the Emperor, so like Mérimée with his old-style manners and pointed stories, "*Mocquard moqueur*" as the Emperor calls him. Cousin maliciously assures him that there is no escaping it; but mercifully, the blow does not descend, and he can lie back in the sun and watch the sunshades from his window in the Rue du Bivouac at Cannes, and the sea sparkling as on the day Fauriel and he had been rowed across to Saint Honorat, and talked with the old custodian.

The war between North and South has much in it to rouse his sarcastic interest. "The Americans display such a fine contempt for morality that I can only compare them to the Romans of old days. They have the same greed and daring, and five years of

terrible war have made awe-inspiring soldiers of them. They'll pay their debt by declaring a bankruptcy, and find money on their neighbours' territory." Refreshing indeed to contemplate a frank exhibition of unloosed instincts, rapacity laid bare; diplomacy, that decadent art, puts, after all, a quite futile varnish on the odious face of things! Apropos of diplomats, one of the most meteoric has just spent his course, and made deaf by delirium to the buzz of intrigue over his successorship brought almost to his bedside, has been snatched from his countless *affaires*, his horses and mistresses, operettes and tailors; Talleyrand has no longer a pupil and a grandson; Morny's candle is out. Grave admonitions, these; Mérimée lengthens out his villegiatura, takes a new doctor's advice, and with the two governesses sets out daily for the aromatic pine-woods between Le Cannet and Vallauris. One of them is curiously equipped, elderly Artemis, with a quiverful of arrows; Mérimée himself supports his steps over the gnarled roots by leaning on the Chinese bow sent him by the Empress of Brazil, on the pressing application of M. de Gobineau. Not only will his arthritic shoulders tweak him less often, but in the pungent effluvia of eucalyptus and pine-trees, he will breathe freely, away from the vulgar hotels on the front at Cannes, as big as the Louvre and much noisier, to say nothing of the swarming young Englishwomen in their Garibaldi caraco—an insult to patriotism as well as to the eye—and their feathered hats! —and their desultory sketching! And up there on the sun-penetrated hill, the irritation before that commonplace end, the final *bêtise*, calms down

and is turned to a mild but grave philosophy.

Afterwards, they will wander placidly down to the Rue du Bivouac, glad to hurry in out of the sudden-falling cold, although the Protean sea could hold them for hours on end. The *Life of Caesar*, the completed opus of the *maître de la maison*, has arrived from Paris. What strange, melancholy thoughts must stir in Mérimée's head and heart as he turns the pages packed with the great man's story (he knows it better than the writer)—why did the illustrious pen not confine itself to handing down a ruler's reflections on a ruler, instead of re-telling a life universally known, and giving it to be understood that he was doing it before a mirror, for occasional reference, as it were? He notes with a quiet glee that Renan has set the key for a whole horde of treatises which dare to pull holes in the fabric of orthodoxy; bigotry has that one merit—it engenders criticism, peradventure the detested draperies may one day all be fretted away, and the truth of the "Jewish story" stand naked and unashamed. After dinner, Panizzi must be dealt out his dole of news; how M. Thiers is swaying towards the Pope and contradicts himself in the Chamber, in perfect good faith, because his fervour wipes from his mind all his former speeches; how the American Parliament is composed of low rabble, and its Senate presided over by a drunken tailor; how useful the Irish and American cut-throats in the Federal Army would prove to the Emperor Maximilian, who is trapped in that Mexican ambush; how Lincoln's death causes a great pother, although he was nothing more than a "first second-rate man". "Caesar" has set out on an imposing tour

in Algeria, which disturbs the sleep of the authorities at home; the inhabitants of the Sahara, overjoyed at an amnesty and the suppressed war levies, have been whirling round his carriage firing into the air and cleaning his boots with their beards, prepatory to feeding him on ostriches and whole oxen—the last sparks of the triumphal fireworks, gay and pathetic and glittering with illusory gold. Panizzi himself announces that he has reached the retiring age; his successors, too, bang at the door; manifestly, the end of the world is in sight. And Mérimée draws his dressing-gown of jonquil-coloured Japanese silk round him, and stumbles up to bed.

But the summer of 1865 has, unknown to the sleeper, murdered sleep for some time to be, and since the Convention of Gastein and the outcry of the French people both need, perhaps, a slight explanation. October finds Biarritz breaking its waves on a beach where two figures are strolling, solid figures, one undisguisedly military in his accoutrement and bearing. The waves must have sunk the secret of those conversations deeper than plummet sounded, for not a word (except that of "frontiers" faintly whispered) has ever been dragged to the surface of history. M. de Bismarck presents the anomaly of a German capable of wit, "wittier than a German has the right to be, something like a Humboldt turned diplomat . . . very polite, not at all *naïf*, he seems entirely devoid of *gemuth*" (a term, on Mérimée's lips, almost as infused with mockery as the old "local colour)." He has the supplementary tact to murmur honeyed things, in his guttural tones, to a number of ladies, one of whom is a-flutter with

admiration; it is true she is of German birth. Life, a heavy-pulsing, aggressive life, beats behind this polished cuirass; elsewhere, death maintains the balance by felling Lord Palmerston,—" the happiest man of this century, for he has almost always done everything he desired, and he desired good and fine things." What a duster is death for the faults scribbled on everyone's slate! Mérimée is no less firm in commending the English manner of suppressing revolts, such as the last one in Jamaica; with the Fenians nearer home, they have ample opportunity of making everyone familiar with the gallows, a sound and patriotic method, alas! not applicable in France, where at present they can count only on the cholera to rid them of encumbrances. Imagine! A country where, it it is claimed, the liberty of the press cannot be permitted, because of the inevitable revolution it would bring in its train, and yet, everyone who has received the elements of an education and knows how to hold a pen, contrives to express himself with such freedom that the ban might as well be imaginary! The Fenians will have that advantage; they will show the English what sort of disorderly rabble swarm and shake their puny but multitudinous fists in France, and prove to them " that if you give folk like that the liberties they ask for, which M. Thiers asserts to be a necessity for all peoples—you will have a revolution in three months. The greatest misfortune that can happen to a people is, I think, to have institutions which are too advanced for their intelligence. When the English institutions are demanded for France, it is necessary to find for them in the first place the common sense and the experience which would make

them possible." Emile Ollivier saw the dilemma with hardly different eyes. "You have liberty", he had confessed to Bright, "and you are looking for democracy; we have democracy and are looking for liberty." And the unrest only seems to give a more despairing glow to that Utopian vision—the perfect European, an exact blend of French and English.

Even in England the ominous cracks in the antique bastions give food for anxiety; what is the point of this 'Reform Bill', and why has Mr. Gladstone put his finger in that pie? Even in England the Trade Unions are powerful to put a spoke in the organization's wheel; how is Mérimée to have his trousers conveyed from Mr. Poole's shop when Mr. Poole's hands are tied by the obstinacy of his workmen? Even in England, "it is not eloquence and oratorical cleverness that decide questions, for not only are the debates carried through in a mysterious masonic language which seems, outwardly, to produce a tissue of lies and yet has a significance understood by all, but each M.P. arrives with his mind made up, and in all probability, an attitude dictated by quite personal considerations." This being so, and the stronghold of Liberty being streaked with crevices, what wonder that on the distressful continent, its weaker defences are being bowled over like ninepins? At this very moment, the Emperor is struggling vainly to see his way through the tangle that has netted Central Europe. But M. de Bismarck overrides with the padded hoofs of his ambition all admonishments to peace. Subtly, he binds Italy to him by the links of their common enmity against Austria. Napoleon

listens one minute to the impassioned discourse of M. Thiers—" to make this war impossible is the duty of every French patriot ! ", the next to the voice of his own *amour propre*, urging him to secure for the Italian kingdom the precious crown of Venetia, which alone will keep her from bursting again into war on the instigation of the firebrand Garibaldi. But M. de Bismarck has galloped in ahead of him, and Italy is tied, even though Austria in desperation makes the long-desired offer. ' What I think is that we shall not mix ourselves up in the conflict, *exceptis excipiendis*, for example, in the case where the Austrians were to march towards Milan." At the Tuileries, M. Metternich, very pale, is to be seen justifying the Austrian refusal to attend the Congress proposed by the Emperor ; the latter of course, is perfectly aware that Austria did not wish to be disturbed in the refurbishing of her army. M. de Goltz, the German ambassador, is, on the other hand, very red ; M. Nigra, the friend of Cavour, looks dark as his name. Peace hovers uncertain over the assembly for a short while, the time to flutter a mournful farewell. " Everything is set for war, except the spirit of the people who, according to their fame and history, are the most warlike . . . The business men all show long and gloomy faces . . . The people seem very happy . . ." And then, M. Fould, who has just finished putting order in French finances, is said to be resigning ; his resignation means a loan ; a loan is war.

On one side, muzzle-loaders and slowness ; on the other, needle-guns, and relentless speed, made possible by a long-laid plan. In three days, Prussia occupies

Hanover, Cassel, Dresden. Paris is all for Benedek and his noble resistance; a false rumour of an Austrian victory lights the glare of rejoicing in the Luxembourg quarter; the students like to make long noses at the régime. Mérimée follows the strategical developments day by day, with Canrobert and the Maréchal Vaillant to explain it over the map. "We understand nothing about Benedek or the Prussians. The Germans are so profound that one simply finds a bottomless hole. It seems to me, up till now, that the Prussians have the superiority." Sadowa, the the first clod on the Second Empire's coffin, proves Mérimée right, as so often, though it gives him no more pleasure than usual. "It is the repetition of the Seven Years War, when the Prussians had invented the iron ramrod for their guns and the Austrians kept to the wooden one. As for M. de Bismarck, he is my hero." Venetia drops like a ripe pear into the Emperor's hand; but if the Austrians cannot do otherwise than let it fall from the tree, Victor Emmanuel quivers with rage, at the humiliation of accepting the prize from France.

Once again, the spectre of war rises in the near foreground. But while the French army is busy replacing its outworn firearms with breechloading *chassepots*, an Austro-French alliance against Italian fury, and a war to prevent Victor Emmanuel invading the coveted territory, are not to be thought of. In the meantime, the Emperor, as if not already harassed and overloaded with half-a-hundred troubles, Mexico, Venetia, Germany, the Pope, the floods at Avignon, *and* the needle-guns, must needs put the time even further out of joint by allowing the debate

in the Senate of a project for replacing the discussion on the Address from the Throne by the liberty to demand explanations from the Corps Législatif. Mérimée, penetrated with his eternal fear of misplaced privileges. and his knowledge of his own countrymen, feels his heart sinking; is the end so near? For that it is the beginning of the end, he has not a second's doubt; in a country where each individual is born with an extraordinary facility for expressing himself, to introduce such a measure is to build new storeys to Babel. "After having examined myself a little, I have resolved to behave as a friend, and I have written the Empress a letter as remarkable for the force of its reasoning as the amenity of its style. I point out to her the effect of the thing's announcement on the Senate, and I fill twelve lines with the arguments against the change and the moment chosen to bring it about." The dignified and tactful protest is received in the same spirit that dictated it. To Mérimée's sincere amazement, the Grand Cross of the Legion of Honour descends on him. "What use is it to me, since I can but pin it on to my dressing-gown?" The proposed measure is introduced, shorn of all its dangerous clauses, without any of this gratuitous advice being needed; but there is something infinitely touching in this rigid loyalty to a dying order on the part of one of its accredited servitors, and in the graceful gesture of the rulers, already haunted as they must be by the uselessness of propping up a leaning oak with sticks designed to support roses.

Panizzi, no less, receives injunctions (he has retired to a disturbed Italy, consoling himself with

sun and Chianti) to see that his governors "adapt to Italian life the military institutions of Prussia, which to-day seem to be the right thing." Why has not France conceived a Bismarck? "We, too, have more than one reform to effect in that quarter, and much to learn. With the love of routine that this country has, the thing will not be easy." The spirit of Fontenoy prevails, while all that now counts at all is that of Sadowa; he would give all the gold lace, the tight tunics, the shakos and bonnets and baggy trousers, the elegance of these witty and gallant lieutenants who strut through the Tuileries, for one plain, brass cuirass, and a fist of iron. With a Bismarck to hold the reins and yet not hurt the sensitive mouths, what a triumphal course the Imperial chariot would have taken! The severe study would not now be hearing the cries and supplications of the Empress Charlotte, who is covering M. Fould with reproaches, a gleam of more than despair in her handsome eyes; Maximilian would not now be staring out from his windows in Mexico city, asking himself how a Hapsburg had come to inherit his share of the family curse in that savage land, and counting the hopeless days. The principle of nationality, so splendid on the lips, so ungrateful in its execution, would not have nourished the two young Hercules, that now turn and shake their shields at their nurse. The Jesuits, with their unctuous and yet sinister murmurs in authority's ear, would not be driving an elected Emperor to behave like an anointed king, owing fealty to a Pontiff who has solemnly declared himself irreconcilable to compromise with progress or liberalism or modern civilization; the

Rhine would long ago have been rolling its waters through French territory. Yes: "it is very clear that M. Bismarck is a great man. What is more, he is too well prepared for us to lose our temper with him. We shall have certain snakes to swallow, and we shall digest them until we have needle-guns."

He says it lightly, with his ironic grace, in that concise, swift language of which he is a master; he says it with the casual glance of one looking at the sky and foretelling rain. For events, the "stupidest" multitude of all, are surging past him and over him, and the thunder is distant, but it growls. He says it as a pendant to a number of consoling precepts despatched to Panizzi, who is amorous, and lost in the labyrinth of some Lady Disdain's fads and whims; and after saying it, he drops the remark, no less casually that he has embarked on a history of Peter the Great, who was "a barbarian with a vengeance, and used to get horribly drunk." But the needle-guns have been flashed across the outlook, like summer lightning, empty of significance, and yet rich in presage. The tone does not change; but the warning has been given.

For the rest, all is grist, even a mockery of his own misgivings, that comes to his irony's mill. As he walks stiff and unsmiling, round the curve of the old port at Cannes, with the "governesses" keeping up their innocuous babble, half in French, half in their own untidier tongue, he mutely resolves to ensconce himself more and more in his stoicism. "I breathe with greater difficulty every day. Sometimes I resign myself to it, sometimes it exasperates me and gives me the blue devils. I cannot prevent myself from

regretting, like King Alfonso the Chaste, that I was not consulted in the arrangement of the world. It would have been easy to make it less stupid, and if it was inevitable to admit Death to it, I should at least have wanted to abolish its sufferings." Quickly, let us banish the blue devils and turn our minds to the excellent leg of mutton we have in prospect for lunch; and then, Edouard Fould, the Finance Minister's son, is expected to-morrow; he will bring a cook who makes sauces that make you wish to lick your arms as far as the elbow! The sun's glow, brave and unhindered, is tempered by a breeze from the Esterel hills; over towards La Napoule, the rich Englishmen's yachts plough the water, and when they tack, the fluttering sails remind him of the twirl of the petticoats at Compiègne. News is filtered through this shimmering net of sunlight, and takes on more and more the quality of a mirage. They say that the Empress has been projecting a journey to Rome, and that if she has been deterred from it, it is not because she has remembered that she is Empress before being a devout Roman Catholic, but because the departure of General Montebello with the French troops from Rome was attended by the most ill-considered piece of ranting on the part of the "Old Priest". They say that the new recruiting law has stirred up more than a little dust in the Press and the Public. "It is only too true that by dint of preaching that Money is the sovereign good, they have brought about a profound alteration in the bellicose instincts of France, I don't say among the people, but in the upper classes. The idea of risking one's life has become repugnant to them, and

the people who call themselves honest folk declare that to be common and unworthy of a gentleman . . . Still, in case of need, I think we should be able to raise sufficient forces to try our strength against all comers." Here is Lord Russell, " in the costume of Mr Punch ", taking the air with his wife, and preceded by a chattering brood of children. He looks tired and resigned to expecting nothing more of life, except the warmth and the sea-breezes; as for politics, he keeps his lips tight shut on the subject, as if this British Arcadia had declared it bad form to exchange anything but civilities and prognostics on the weather. The two ambling parties cross and go on their separate ways, Lord Russell towards the Anglo-Saxon elegance of the Croisette, Mérimée to toil up the hill towards the fort that dominates Old Cannes; Miss Lagden is clutching the sketch-book and brushes, Mrs Ewers holds the big sunshade; he will try to seize some of the fugitive tones that traverse the Mediterranean towards evening, rose and pigeon-grey and violet; not an easy task, for the falling cold, impregnated with danger, urges him to transcribe them with all possible speed, before the elderly bones protest, and the company must start home again.

And then, one of these radiant afternoons, Cousin, after a late night, drops at two o'clock into the stertorous slumber of apoplexy, and does not wake again; the death-rattle, lasting what seems an eternity contrasts horribly with a calm face empty of suffering . . . the first warning bolt out of the stainless heaven. . . . Time seems to telescope itself into a compressed period of waiting. Let events take their

heedless course. What if the dawn of the "Liberal Empire", the morning star of Emile Ollivier and his cronies, broods with a sinister gleam over the horizon? A year more, a year less! France, so unfitted for the loose rein of constitutional liberties, will take the bit between her teeth, and gallop into the abyss; but long before then, thinks Mérimée, a more dire *étouffement* than usual will have spared him the view of the cataclysm. For the moment, the pompous splendours of the Paris Exhibition can throw kaleidoscopic dust into the people's eyes, draw down the iridescent gauzes that conceal the pallor and the despair of the performers in the last Grand Ballet; once again, the open carriages roll up the Champs Elysées; escorted by dazzling uniforms, the Crowned Heads of Europe (Berezowski's attempt to treat the parade as a shooting gallery having thrown it but into a momentary disarray) nod graciously to the clamorous applause of a doomed populace. And everywhere among the fantastic booths and pavilions, at gala performances of Meyerbeer's long-awaited "Africaine", at the Austrian Embassy, where the petulant Princess Metternich succeeds in using a huge State grant to outdo all other receptions, in the Prussian King's box at the Variétés, before which Hortense Schneider, adorable Grand Duchess, curtsies lower than ever, sounds the good-natured, brute's laughter of Mérimée's "hero", the latest counterpart of Caesar, never out of his white cuirassier's uniform and delighted with Paris, the impression he has made on the Parisians, and the subtlety of his moves on the chessboard, concealed by his Teuton bluffness. "*Tiens, c'est Bismarck*!" "*Il n'a pas l'air si*

*méchant que cela* ! " But the crowd does not hear his lighthearted recommendations ; why did the Emperor not invade Belgium in 1866 ? These baby kingdoms ! they exist to be overridden. As for himself, he can confess with a crude pride to Napoleon, that his, Bismarck's, intervention alone had two months ago nipped a Franco-Prussian conflict in the bud ; the Junkers are too headstrong ! And, like a giant bulldog, he puts himself out to convince this frivolous city that his ferocious Goth's head belies his amiability ; his bark is the guffaw of pleasure, his bite all play. " There is nothing so droll as M. de Bismarck in helmet and cuirass." At Biarritz, where everyone had been lapped in that leisure a German so seldom permits himself, the tin soldier on the beach must have made the laughter rise in French throats. But the modern world is not tc the tasteful ; the flourish goes by the board, and the cuirass, plain and humourless, needs no elegance for its triumph. And Mérimée sees this gleaming obstacle no smaller than it is. It is easy to write to Panizzi, to build cloud-castles for a journey to Venice, because over the ices of the Café Florian they can forget how uninhabitable Paris has been made by the Exhibition. A project as agreeable to contemplate as a rainbow ; but by 1867, " to all the projects one makes, it is necessary to add—if M. de Bismarck allows it."

Between, then, the mailed " hero " in his breastplate on the outside, and the undermining of the revolution within, what could be expected to endure ? At the very opening of the great fête in the Palais de l'Industrie, when prizes were to be awarded to the exhibitors, while twelve hundred musicians broke out

in the first imposing bars of Rossini's hymn, the *personnel* of the Austrian Embassy and the officers of the Central Empire rose unostentatiously and withdrew. "The captain of an Austrian frigate has telegraphed from New Orleans to the Austrian Minister in Washington that the Emperor Maximilian has been put to death and that Juarez refuses to hand over his dead body." The despatch quivered in the Emperor's hand; but the fête must suffer no interruption. This was a great handful of feathers plucked from the eagles' wings! Never again would they take so majestic and swift a flight; and the omen did but cast a blacker shade on the future. Already the *bourgeois* were quaking in their shoes; already, the populace of Paris, the idol of the day, to whom everyone, including the country's Chief, paid studious court, were consumed with one fever—*manger du Prussien.* Fear vibrated in the air, a fear the more tormenting for being without a name. "It is the same sensation as the music of Mozart gives, when the Commander is approaching." The Luxemburg affair of the summer, when the unrest of the capital had driven the Emperor to make a gesture of insistence, and to press the point in the ever-vexed question of French frontiers, had only stirred up the mud in the home waters. "Is it in our interests, is it common sense to threaten, in the state of dissension we are in?" Mérimée's despairing remonstrances must have seemed like the pouring of oil on an Atlantic tempest. "We are, in point of fact, caught up in the strangest of situations, having all the inconveniences of a Parliamentary system without any of its solidity; the inconveniences of absolutism and even those of

liberty." The moment a bill is drafted for giving greater facility to public meetings, the workmen of the Faubourg St. Antoine up and demand the permission to assemble—on the anniversary of the fall of the Bastille! Thus by cutting away the outer tangles of the popular jungle, all that is done in admitting a little air and light is to give the poisonous reptiles free access to the open. Emile Ollivier may be an *arriviste*, may be playing his own astute cards, but he is right, and Thiers, as always, is wrong. The expansion of the Parliament's powers will but lead the Empire to the abyss where now lie the Bourbons and the House of Orleans. "The Emperor must govern." But the old Caesar is sick, and sickness starts the miasma of blunders in his brain. "*Je crois, mon cher Panizzi, que nous sommes nés trop tard.*"

The great stumbling-block offers itself in the shape of an old principle, so fervently upheld, and now erect on its own legs, as it were, having skipped out of its progenitors' reach. "After we have preached the respect for nationalities, we cannot honestly oppose Germany's attempt to unify herself, as Italy has done." And Mérimée prays that the domineering Prussia may find the forces of revolution she has unchained turning and rending her; that will, at least, give France time to breathe. In any case, always convinced of his hero's virtues, he gives him infinite credit. "I cannot believe that M. de Bismarck, who is a man of sense, with much work on his hands, will try for a second time to stake everything and provoke us." South Germany, whose dislike of the huge Slavonic state in the North and its huge leader had

led the Emperor to put a tentative finger on Luxemburg, passes still for sharing the Austrian resentment against the brutal annexationists; there is every hope that so old a barrier will not easily crumble. But Andrassy, the Austrian premier, has made the boldest of assertions; the monarchy has gained nothing by its severance from the body of Germanic States; a war with Prussia would be nothing less than fratricidal! And Mérimée, however subtle his knowledge of the White Cuirassier, forgets that he has secured the neutrality of Russia, forgets, a little too much, the publication of the military treaties between Prussia and the South German States. As for Italy, the part played by France in the stemming of the triumphal march into Rome, her error committed in allowing French regulars to serve disguised as volunteers in the Papal forces, suffice to preserve the frown on the faces of Italian patriots whenever the name of Napoleon is uttered. England has too long held apart from the European imbroglio to break her precedent; and the Reform Bills will keep her occupied for some time to come. Alone, harried by the Pope's devotees, menaced by the rising flood of Parliamentary disputes, of Democracy's ranting, seated on the ruins of his Mexican enterprise, pale, wrinkled with ill-health, the protagonist in the superb adventure of 1852 fronts the overcast heavens, waits for the first clap of thunder—alone.

All through the two sultry years of waiting, Mérimée bolsters up his own failing hopes and forces; he argues laboriously with himself, calls up a cloud of imaginary witnesses to the specious calm that has descended. In the spring of 1868 the recruiting law,

it is true, has been received with something like enthusiasm. "It appears that the warlike bump of the Gauls is still prominent; but there is not yet any question of war, and I even hope that, in my lifetime, there will be none." Let him bring his grey hairs to "the monument" with the slow and dignified progress he has embarked on, and he will be satisfied. The death of Narvaez, the Spanish despot, has laid open a breach for disorder in Madrid; but even if a little whirlwind of war rises there, it should not surmount the Pyrenees. "M. de Bismarck is tired out, and that is a guarantee of tranquillity for the poor world." When the cat's away, the play of a few Spanish mice cannot do much harm. A fine harvest promises well for the French elections; the House of Commons has subsided into the comparative placidity of the Feminist problem; the Emperor has successfully tried the waters of Plombières; the name has for the second time brought him good fortune! And the calm gives leisure to see things European in a truer perspective, to pick out the danger-spots. M. de Goltz, the German Ambassador, is an excellent functionary who has always done his best to smooth over rough places; M. de Bismarck, the man of sense, the "cork that keeps in the bellicose froth." But when the King of Prussia hints to Lord Clarendon that the French Government could utilise a war to divert the country's attention from its internal squabbles, he omits one glaring fact, namely "that he himself has at home a considerable party who are set on war. It is the party of the Old Prussians, who swear only by Frederick the Great, who since the battle of Sadowa think that nothing can resist the

needle-gun." And if there is a rupture of this latest peace, "it will have been the work of the sword-trailers in Berlin."

March 1869. Panizzi, now an Italian senator, confides his gnawing anxieties. But his correspondent still keeps a half-cheerful front. "I don't see the future all in black as you do. . . . To-day fighting demands so much money that unless one has a treasury as full as that of the Prussian king before Sadowa, or a Parliament of an excessive good-will—*rara avis in terris*—it is not possible to fire a single volley." But if the war-monster is ending in an abortion, that of the socialist revolution kicks and grows fat. "The society of to-day, with its love of money and material pleasures, is conscious of its own stupidity and weakness. Only an organized aristocracy could resist the tide; and where are we to find one? . . . We have put weapons in the opposition's hands, and they are using them." The last trumpet-call to memory is being sounded in Egypt, the field of glories belonging to a sane and heroic time. The Red Sea and the Mediterranean are joined, and a Frenchman has accomplished a work which once, under the granite reign of Sesostris, cost the lives of 120,000 slaves. The dahabiehs of the Nile will be loaded with all that the 19th century can offer in the way of greatness—envoys of these degenerating, paltry kingdoms, painters and statesmen striving not to look too insignificant in the Pyramids' shadow. The Empress has asked Mérimée to accompany her for the opening of the Suez Canal; but he knows that sick men are a burden. He stays behind to contemplate the fresh fall into chaos of the

elections. "This year, they say that the candidates are spending a heap of money. One of them keeps open table, makes his electors drunk, takes them back in carriages and gives them plaids and scarves to keep them warm on the way home." In 1828, the boxers of Sir Richard Wilson were thoroughly amusing; but corruption in one's own country is a sorry spectacle. He drags himself in the late summer to Saint Cloud; again the malaise, again the invisible unrest! "I look as if I were in the front boxes, but I know nothing, and see very little. It is behind the curtain that the piece is being played. It is certain that the country is in an extraordinary state of over-excitement. They say it is love of liberty which produces it. . . . In France, they conceive a passion for a word, without troubling much about its true meaning. . . . It seems to me that a risky experiment is being made. They are giving this people a liberty such as it has never possessed, and they dupe themselves into thinking that it will not commit the most foolish actions. It is rather as if a wise tutor, in order to cure his pupil of drunkenness, were to intoxicate him every day. . . . The great evil of the situation is that there isn't a *Man*."

The precarious equilibrium, the conflicting urge of blind envies and rages and self-expressions, the illusory smoothness of the new Parliamentary machine, the hardly-veiled threats of the republicans—1870. "The very people who are demanding the abolition of the death-penalty are those who have assassins for friends." High-sounding words are answered by higher-sounding words, followed by attacks on the obstructing theorists. "The character of every

Frenchman prevents him from taking any initiative, and at the same time drives him to criticize everything that goes on round him. . . . The moral sense of this country is absolutely perverted." Emile Ollivier, proud figure-head at the poop of his new-built vessel, rides the waves with a confidence that excites Mérimée's pitiful mockery; Lamartine, too, in 1848, all noble declamations and sincere phrases, imagined himself to be master of the situation. "Our workmen, fortunately, have not yet learned from the Trade Unions to blow up their employers' houses; but doubtless, that will come before long. What is profoundly sad is the support given by apparently honest folk to the demolishers of all countries." And then, the three heavy stamps are heard; the stone Commander, forgotten in this intestine confusion, is at the door.

Destiny, more sarcastic even than Mérimée himself in her blind ordinances, said her last word of all by putting the match to the conflagration in a quarter of the globe dearer to him than most others—in Spain. As if resolved to oppose a bulwark of optimism to the clearly fatal array of circumstances, even after the provocative speech of the Duc de Grammont on July 4th, he would not resign himself to reality. "I do not understand that there can be any possibility of war, unless, for some reason unknown to me. M. de Bismarck absolutely desires one." Why not give full rein to the Carlists and Alphonsists, with the chance of pulling from the civil war a plum like the Basque provinces, and of placing them under a French protectorate? His temporizations were cut short by the doctored telegram from Ems; the White

Cuirassier had his reason; the enemy within the walls found itself momentarily at one with the Empress herself; it must be war. Mérimée, still on the crest of his hopeful wave, looked round him and was touched by the infectious fever. "There are a great number of voluntary enlistments; the soldiers go off full of joy and confidence. They say we have the same superiority in arms and equipment that the Prussians had in 1866. I fear there is not much genius among the generals." The truth he had worshipped all his life turned into pathetic delusions under his pen, escaped him altogether; by a terrible twist of chance, he found himself still justifying the Prussian Machiavelli. "You may be certain of this. The secretary who brought the declaration of war went to take his leave of M. de Bismarck, with whom he had been on very good terms. M. de Bismarck said to him: "It will be the regret of my whole lifetime that I was not with the King at Ems, when M. Benedetti arrived there." The flash of the cuirass blinded him; when the bogus treaty was published that revealed a French plan, in concordance with Prussia, to annex Luxemburg to France, he had a brief glimpse of his hero's duplicity.

The shaking of the edifice gradually communicated itself to him. "The Emperor leaves to-morrow at six in the morning for the front. Still the great enthusiasm. One hundred and fifteen thousand volunteers. The military men are all confidence; as for myself, I am sick with fear." His last notes to the companion of old feasts and tranquil epicurean dialogues read like what they were, the gasps of a man not far from his end. "I saw the Empress the day before yesterday."

Weissenberg and Worth had set the French armies in full retreat towards Metz. "She is firm as a rock, although she does not conceal from herself the full horror of her situation. I do not doubt that the Emperor will run into the jaws of death; for he can only return home with a victory and a victory is impossible. Here, nothing is ready. There is a lack of everything. Disorder everywhere. . . . Jules Favre is asking for arms for the popular quarters of the town; that means a new Prussian army on our hands." He had always said it; the most flaming patriotism would be rendered null and void by the schisms in the stupid world of politics, by Chaos. Vionville, Mars-la-Tour, the indecision of Bazaine, the heart-rending magnificence of the charging cavalry at Rezonville. *Finis Galliae.* The Empire prostrate in a morass of blood and disgrace. "I expect in a week to hear the Republic proclaimed, and in a fortnight to see the Prussians." The Red forces inside might ruin the defence; in any case, the eagles were fluttering in their death-agony.

And for the last time of all, while Paris armed and waited to see the smoke of the enemy's camp just outside its walls, while the news of Sedan, the Emperor's useless courting of death, the white flag and the flight of the Prince Imperial into Belgium sounded its knell, Mérimée made a desperate bid for the survival of the Empire. On one of those days between the envelopment of the French Army and the proclamation of the Republic at the Hotel de Ville, a tall figure, its shoulders bowed with age and illness, was introduced into M. Thiers' study. Between the thin lips, bloodless already with the effort of venturing

out of doors, came in disquieting gasps what M. Thiers understood to be an appeal. The face was haggard, drawn with oppression; the voice, if it could be called one, kept some of the formal coldness which M. Thiers remembered. Would not—M. Thiers—say the word—which would—maintain the dynasty—on the throne—it had so—creditably occupied? M. Thiers looked, and thought, through his rising pity, perhaps, that if this was all the dynasty could find to send as an envoy at so pressing a juncture—! "After Sedan, I regret that nothing of the kind is possible." And the grey old man rose, still correct in the well-cut English trousers, and slowly walked from the room. Out in the street, he started to make his painful way towards the Tuileries. Then he stopped, and reflecting that he had undertaken a mission suggested to him by no one, and that the answer was not such as would surprise or interest that broken but still nobly upbearing lady in the palace, he decided to take the shortest cut to the rue de Lille. He glanced up at the pale sky of September, mellowed with the diffused sunlight of early autumn, the sky of Paris; and the sight of the grey buildings round him, and the anxious passers in the half-empty streets (for riots were imminent), seemed once and for all to snap something inside him, and he surrendered himself to the inner flood of tears; of what use now to play the stoic, even alone? "All my life," he thought, and his lips trembled, "I have tried to free myself from prejudice, to be a citizen of the world before being a Frenchman. But all these philosophical draperies are useless. I bleed to-day with the wounds of these idiotic French, I weep for their humiliations, and however

ungrateful and absurd they are, I love them still." The Mask is down; and the Face, with two glittering and most human drops running down the furrows of time, looks out this once on the shattered world, before the anguished eyes finally close, and a whiter Mask, this time irrevocably, freezes all emotion into the blank of Silence.

# PART II

# THE FACE

## I

He lived through nineteen days of Republic, long enough to hear that the Empress had found a safe retreat over the Channel. The faithful governesses watched over his deathbed at Cannes. "It is certainly these horrible events in politics that shortened his days", wrote Miss Lagden to Panizzi. She lies buried near him in the Protestant cemetery of Cannes. For Mérimée had left a codicil of his will expressing his clear desire that "a minister of the Augsburg Confession" should preside over his funeral. The minister, in a discourse worthy of a fanatical Jesuit, and far less subtle, snatched the unprotesting corpse, as it were, into the bosom of the Protestant church. But how should a black-coated bigot be aware of a gentleman's concluding gesture, designed to spare his friends the pain of a mere civil burial? Morny, too, who spent markedly more of his life in the Bois and the boudoir than at Mass, had received the last unctions from the Archbishop of Paris. *Cela se faisait.* Besides, what Elpenor had requested, a nineteenth century pagan might also demand—"not only a little earth, but a commemoration".

In the month of October, 1831, Mérimée was promenading his cold features, his wit and his tight

gloves through the salons of the Chaussée d'Antin and the noisy rooms of Véry and the Café Anglais, gratifying his ceaseless curiosity and forgetting the "dirtiest rogues in Andalucia" by drinking in the sophisticated perfumes of the *lorettes* and their chatter, when his elegant placidity was ruffled by a small event that might easily have been part of any fashionable young author's life. A letter reached him one morning, written in a feminine hand, simply and yet not naïvely expressed; the writer had been completely captivated by the novelty and fearless colour of the *Chronique de Charles IX*; might she, dared she, ask for the autograph of so gifted a novelist? Dryly and yet with a warming to the compliment from which few writers are free, Mérimée made the mental note to satisfy this flattering whim. He turned the page with a lazy hand; the signature stared at him: "Lady Algernon Seymour". He gave a start of excitement. Byron's country, Byron's compatriot, and better still, a figure moving in Byron's world! It was too good to be true, not only piquant in its unexpectedness, but promising, the most ideal of intrigues. He took up a pen, and sent a polite and inquisitive answer to London.

The disappearance of that first civil note we regret, as Mérimée was wont to deplore the absence of any memoirs from the hand of Aspasia's waiting-woman; and that regret is the first of many, more galling still. For the *Lettres à une Inconnue*, revealed to the public as a posthumous homage to a long friendship and a recognised talent have been, as M. Chambon puts it, *fortement tripatouillées*, thoroughly mishandled; the thread of their sequence was thrown into a wilful tangle,

by the very fingers engaged in making the tribute. The letters missing complicate those we have been allowed to read; dates are absent, or erroneous; as for the replies, not a trace of them was ever permitted to meet the eyes of those readers whose appetite had been set on edge by the one-sided correspondence. For it was a question—most suitably!—of mystification, from the very opening of the adventure; and although research and the gradual lifting of the veil by the dark lady of the letters have initiated us into all that we wish to know of her, yet the curtain hangs, and must always hang, heavy and implacable over the train of incidents that composed this love. Love there was; Mérimée cannot be accused of passing *that* off with a shrug; but the race and the prize? Over what track was it run, and was the prize other than the genuine comradeship into which the love ripened and grew mellow? Commentators, gnawing moths of psychology, eat into the fabric, leave what infinitesimal rents you will, for the curious to peer through! We will be less ungrateful. Like two chemical substances which when mingled turn to an undecided gray, but alone keep their colour's primitive richness, the two lovers, for us, must stand well apart either side of a danger-line that prevents their fusion. "Blue", says Mérimée, "is the coquette's colour." Had it not been for the blue's perpetual depth, would Mérimée's pure white—for pure white he now appears, the white of perfect naturalness—have ended thus by striking our astonished gaze, clean in its shining contrast?

For the whole Mérimée is in these letters, swept of all the complicated blemishes he likes to bespot

himself with; never was nature more explicit. And it is not without a tinge of malice in our pleasure that we can hold the new mirror of truth up to him, and tax him with being such as it represents him; he has thwarted and evaded and teased us long enough, in all conscience. "Never take a woman for confidant", he admonishes his Unknown at one point: "Sooner or later, you will repent of it." His own prognostic recoils on himself with a completeness that would have roused his cynicism—had he lived to see it. For with all the weight of a personality seeking refuge from the bitterness that it brews for itself by its own weaknesses, Mérimée leaned on the very broken reed he bade her beware of. She made public the three hundred and fifty odd letters that he wrote faithfully to her over a space of thirty-seven years, not, we like to think, out of any desire to draw the rays of publicity on herself, but to add a wreath to the dead friend's laurels; and the first letter of those which she has handed over to us lifts a corner of the Mask, the second pulls resolutely at it, and by the time we come to the end of those which led up to their meeting, the Face, bare of all shield, is exposed to our vulgar gaze. What a refined vengeance on the part of Fate, to use a woman for the betrayal of one who was happy only in the society of women!

The polite answer opened the jousting. For the mysterious lady was not so easily going to allow the Parisian Don Juan to add a fresh name to his list, for all her spontaneous admiration. She parried the discreet thrust with another, giving a cursory sketch of her tastes, her appearance, and her manner of life; not too precise, just enough to whet the desire

for more. Mérimée advanced on to her ground, countered with an unflattering picture of himself. Not that he ceased to be obliged to fence more or less in the dark. "Everything is mysterious in you, and the same reasons make you behave in exactly the opposite manner to that which one would find in others . . ." She has snared him; for she is not a little crooked, roundabout in her ways, feline and treacherous; has she not, too, "splendid black eyes", according to her own description? *Une Femme est un Diable* . . . is the experienced young man about town to be laid low with the fever of Don Antonio? Already he repents of that first movement; M. de Talleyrand has warned the world against them. M. de Talleyrand has also appended that "one should never say harsh things of oneself. One's friends will always be equal to that task." He wishes he had not surrendered so much of himself; that is all Mérimée. The impulse—and women, because he was strongly drawn to them, could easily find him impulsive—projects him into action; no sooner has he committed himself than his eye falls on the Greek inscription of his ring, and he curses himself for his imprudence; is not the world stupid, and has he not, perhaps, childishly tripped?

But the first bouts of this epistolary warfare leave him eaten up with curiosity over his invisible foe. "I begin to accustom myself to your ways and I am really not surprised at anything." He admits her to the daily round of his life in Paris; again he lets his pen gallop, and this time he runs directly against something rigid and firm. "Guess where I was on Saturday night, what I was doing at midnight. I was on the platform of

one of the towers of Notre Dame, and I was drinking orangeade and taking ices in the company of four friends and a magnificent moon; the whole accompanied by a large owl which flapped round us." Paris, his own Paris, pleases him even more by this ghost-light than in its trivial daytime. "The city looks like one of those towns mentioned in the *Thousand and one Nights*, where the inhabitants have been bewitched during their sleep." And then, noticing or suspecting that he has dropped into a Romantic *cliché*, that his attitude has been spoilt, he shifts abruptly. "The tiresome part was that some of us in the presence of the owl and the moon felt obliged to assume a poetic manner and utter commonplaces; in point of fact, little by little, every one began to talk foolishly." Not he, of course! He must have been looking on, as if the white world below were a corner of Delécluze's salon—or that is what he should have remembered to do. On to this souvenir is tacked an inevitable reminder of his usual evenings. "I have been to a ball given by some of the young men I know, where all the Opéra chorus ladies were invited. Most of these women are stupid; but I have noticed how superior they are in moral delicacy to the men of their class." The good-for-nothing is always busy observing; but the *grande dame* he confides these impressions to recoils. "You are looking on me as a Sardanapalus. . . . You reproach me with that evening as if it had been a crime, and as an even greater crime that I take the part of those poor girls." He has overstepped the mark; how idiotic to have forgotten the prudery of the English!

But, if he has erred in thinking her attitude towards

his bachelor occupations to be that of most of his women friends, he will nevertheless not move a foot back from his convictions; the study of mankind is too dear to him; she may frown if she wishes, and inform him that her very moral relations disapprove of him. He defends himself with the story of a little girl who was seen to leave a house in the Faubourg St. Honoré each afternoon and return at midnight to her invalid mother. One day she asked the concierge for a lighted candle. Surprised not to see her reappear, the woman mounted to the attic, found the mother dead on her mattress, and the little girl busy burning a mass of letters—"without reading them", she explained. Her mother's last counsel to her had been to continue as a super at the Opera, and to be very good. "Tell me, now, if that little girl has not infinitely more merit in leading the life she leads than you have, you who enjoy the rare happiness of irreproachable surroundings, and a nature so refined that in some ways it resumes for me a whole civilisation." Hypocrisy at once jangles his nerves and sets him defending outcasts, even at the risk of tumbling into sentimentality. Accustomed to judge people by their actions, and not by the good he might be charitable enough to suppose dormant in them, he cannot tolerate the self-satisfaction of the *femme du monde*. Too intelligent to be a prey of snobbery, he reacts instantly against the icy perfections of a sheltered lady's existence; the outlaw is simpler, and, not a doubt of it, better. The reasoning is logical—but logical *à la Stendhal*, with more than a spice of prejudice in it; for the truth is that the superficial charms of the chorus-ladies and their lack of artifice have an appeal

for him they will never entirely lose ; and it is so much less trouble to pay court to a velvet-trousered stevedore in a masked ball than to a Madame d'Espard, especially if one can return, on quitting them, to a comfortable home !

But the attraction of the unknown in Lady Algernon entitles her to a precise account of his feelings. " I must tell you the truth. I can only bear bad society at rare intervals, and that from an inexhaustible curiosity of all varieties of the human species." (The desire to " watch the wheels go round "—what else upholds this correspondence ?). " I never dare to frequent bad company if it is composed of men. There is something too repulsive in that, especially in this country ; for in Spain, I have always had muleteers and toreadors for my friends. . . . I have even drunk out of the same leathern bottle as a convict. . . . One must add that there was only the one bottle, and that one must drink if one's thirsty. Don't think on that account that I have a predilection for low life. I simply like to see other ways of living, other faces and to hear another language. . . . But all that is so much Arabic to you, and I don't know why I tell you it." Why ? Because it is never disagreeable to analyse one's attitude towards life, and because she has provoked him by reminding him of a world he claims to despise. Far from him be Balzac's creed of the necessity for a strong discipline in society ; those tight-laced Mme Récamiers and Mrs Clarkes, they divert for a while, but they are all out for effect ; why should someone who has all their intelligence and is well-dressed enough not to look out of place in their salons bow the knee before them ? They are

only useful to secure advancement, these women of the Restoration, or, if their physique is presentable, to make love to; apart from that, all sham intellect, sham religion, and an unjustified prestige. His Unknown herself—she really must beware of resembling them, now that he has disclosed his true belief to her. He has begun a water-colour for her; she is finishing a piece of embroidery. "Try to find a reliable messenger", he instructs her (for a long time her timidity, or her coquetry, will reduce them to employing third parties, duennas and valets, in this comedy of intrigue). "Know, furthermore, that there is nothing cheaper than to do harm for the pleasure of harming. Get rid of your optimistic notions, and realise that we are in this world to defend ourselves and fight against everyone."

The universe in league against him! Poor young persecuted Byron! What is this new face of tragedy? Was Musset right after all, with his picture of the *mal du siècle*, and its hectic phenomena? But quickly, the balance reasserts itself. "A learned friend of mine, who reads hieroglyphics, has told me that on the Egyptian coffins it is often possible to find the two words: Life, War, which proves that I've not invented the maxim I have just given you." Erudition, his eternal stand-by, comes to his aid; he will not be caught posing, or at any rate, posing for long; she is sure to take his sincerity for a pose. "*There's* science for you", he adds, in English; the face-about is complete. The next letter shows their intimacy growing, in spite of the mists that intervene. "I often ask myself what I am to you, and what you are to me. To the first question, I cannot have an answer;

as for the second, I imagine I love you as if you were a fourteen-year-old niece that I was bringing up." This much to reassure her; but he returns to the old charge, taxes her with being the victim of the puritanical education natural to England, and the snare it lays by exciting a girl's curiosity. Then again he shrinks back. "I ought perhaps to do as you do, and scratch out all the first page of what I have written; but I prefer to abandon it to your meditations and your curl-papers." But he is *sous le charme*, as they say; he considers the description she has given of herself, and realises that it appeals prodigiously to him and that she is beginning to occupy at least half of his active thoughts. "I am studying you with a lively curiosity." (The microscope again). "I have theories concerning the most insignificant things, on gloves, on boots, on buckles, etc., and I attach a great importance to all that, because I have discovered that there is a real connection between women's characters and the caprice . . . which makes them choose one stuff or another."

He hazards, then, the revelation that he is a great feminist, weighing the risk of rousing her puritanical reflections on his amorous experiences against the certainty of interesting her because she is, even as an example of the all-absorbing sex, interesting to him. From all appearances he has miscalculated once more; and his error plunges them into a wood of incomprehensions. Before long, in a fit of almost ludicrous pettishness, or of a spleen that he feels to be not even Byronic, he lets fly at her, and, in the succeeding three seconds, runs over the whole gamut of his moods and mental shiftings. She has sent a

long missive, heavy with disapprovals and warnings. "I forgive you, and that with all the more pleasure because, in sober truth, I believe that in spite of your temper, I like you better when you are ill-humoured than in any other of your states of mind. . . . You inform me that you are 'engaged for life', as if you were to say: 'I am engaged for the next dance.'" Why has she raised the question of a permanent union? Is she so hypocritical, or inexperienced, or unimaginative as to conceive no sentiment outside marriage? A little French mockery in the best dandy's style will not be out of place; for she has irritated him. "Do you know that, if your love were promised elsewhere, I should be seriously convinced that it would be impossible for you not to love me? How could you fail to do so, you who have made *me* no promises, since the first law of nature is to take an instant dislike to anything that savours of an obligation?" For example, he has been copying a Velasquez for her; she has expressed a desire that he will not send it; he feels all the more strongly inclined to do so. Fortunately, it is not an easy object to despatch; besides, obscure individuals have been intercepting their correspondence; the water-colour might be swallowed in the same gulf.

And, as if the obstacle roused him, he remembers how much he longs to meet her, his tantalizing Sibyl. Perhaps she can come to Paris in October; he will sacrifice to the pleasure of their encounter a proposed tour round the galleries of Antwerp and Amsterdam. "Your vanity will make you say here; 'What a fine sacrifice, only to prefer me to fat white Flemish fishwives, and on canvas,

too ! ' " But it *is* a sacrifice, for he has good reason to doubt her arrival. He thinks again of her defects. " You seem to me to be given over to religion, superstitions, even. . . . You are weak and jealous, two good qualities in a woman ; two faults in a man. I have them both." His self-pity is too strong for him; he dares to excite her commiseration, forgetful of his own dictum on the imprudence of frankness. Even so, he reserves himself. She has asked him what is the matter that is absorbing him. " I should have to tell you what my character and my life are, and things of which no one has an idea, because I have never yet found anyone to inspire me with sufficient confidence. Perhaps, when we have met often, we shall become friends and you will come to know me ; it would be the greatest treasure for me to have someone to whom I could tell all my thoughts, past present. . . . Good-bye ; let us quarrel no more and be friends." It is difficult to smile at, it would be hasty to sympathize with his handing over of himself bound into the custody of uncertainty, and the more we imagine his incognita to have revealed of herself, the more wonder is to be felt at this disregard of the reminder on his ring. His lion's vogue, his literary blossoming, have they all really withered in his estimation ? But the elusive lady is not preoccupied with suspicions of his sincerity ; a duellist far from sure of his own proficiency has no time to consider the quality of his opponent's attack. He is a Frenchman, a Parisian, she knows him for a *coureur de femmes* ; she is on her guard. " You tell me ", we find him answering, " of particular reasons which prevent you from seeking to find yourself in my

company. I respect your secrets and do not ask to know your motives. . . . Perhaps you have been treated to a sermon about me which still rings in your ears. . . . Your natural prudence doubtless contributes greatly to your unwillingness. Be reassured I shall not fall in love with you. A few years ago, that might have happened; now, I am too *old* and I have been too unhappy. I could not fall in love again, because my illusions have brought me too many disenchantments in love."

*Desenganos*—disenchantment—the Spanish word has a dying fall which must have pleased him. This old young man of 28, on what reefs has his barque of passions foundered? Our mind flies to that story told by Taine[1] and to Mme. Mérimée's portrait of her only child, with its already sarcastic mouth, precocious forehead, and eyes agleam with intelligence under the abundant curls. "At the age of eleven, I believe, being guilty of some misdemeanour, he was severely scolded and sent out of the drawing-room; overwhelmed and in tears, he was shutting the door when he heard a laugh; someone was saying: 'Poor child! he thinks we are in a terrible rage!' and Taine precipitately continues: 'The idea of being duped revolted him, he swore to repress always a sensitiveness that brought such humiliations, and he kept his word." Are we to believe that from the moment of that slight lapse from discretion on his parents' part, the inability to see things in their true proportion, which is at the same time the curse and the privilege of childhood, became an ingrained habit of mind? that there is little difference between

[1] Preface to the *Lettres d une Inconnue.*

his wincing at the schoolboy gibes of his Fresnel cousins over his English clothes and English writings, and his dismay at a woman's coquetry? Alas! if such were the case, if that early rebuff had bred in him his mistrust he would not have dared now to drape himself in the cloak of the misunderstood; for the grown man must surely laugh to scorn the accusation of not having outgrown the vulnerability of his infantile years, and of trailing with him through adolescence to manhood the grotesque, if pathetic, mantle of the child's grudge against humanity. No. Mme Mérimée, for all her eighteenth century dryness, understood him. *Gouailleur â taper*, she said of him. The precocity of that brow, and the rare brightness of those eyes lead us nearer the truth. Behind them the cogwheels of judgment revolved too quickly and too early; and judgment, the faculty of summing up at a glance all that traverses the retina or the brain, is a fearful gift, a two-edged knife, if ever there was, one which gashes its owner as frequently as the object he aims at. All through Mérimée's life, the steel of that positivist weapon lay in the scales against the very red gold of his heart's promptings. For, from his constant railings at life, we have a right to conclude that like nine mortals out of ten he sought happiness; and we see how an ever-trembling balance kept him perpetually on its border-line. He was born too intelligent; to his last hour, he struggled under the weight of that excess, which brought him all his desires but one, that which can be secured only by a surplus of heart.

*Desengaños*—the melodious syllables have melted him, evoking the country he has returned from; he

is emboldened to tell his Unknown how much of an escape it had been, not merely a ceding to the magnetism of one of those primitive civilizations which rest him from the banality of a people he knows too well. "I was about to fall in love when I left for Spain. It is one of the fine actions of my life. The person who prompted the voyage has never known anything of it all. If I had stayed at home, I should have committed perhaps a great piece of foolishness; that of offering to a woman worthy of all the happiness one can enjoy on earth, of offering to her, I say, in exchange for the loss of all things she held dear, a tenderness which I myself felt to be very inferior to the sacrifice that she would perhaps have made. You remember my code: love excuses everything, but one must be quite certain that there is love. You may be sure that that precept is more vigorous than those of your Methodist friends." So *Mariquita de mi alma* (he must have some sort of gallant mode of addressing her) may rest in peace; he is twice shy, they will never be anything but friends; he will perhaps find in her something he has been looking for, a woman he is not in love with and whom he can trust. For love means passion, jealousy and doubt and abuse and reconciliations and lying at the mercy of a woman's weathercock instincts and decisions; and that, because the need for patience and charity that it entails is too great for him to satisfy, he will tolerate no more. Thus, with a clear heart, because he has stepped out of the charmed circle and would sooner perish (he is sure) than tread into it again, he plays with the innocuous fire; for, she so wary and he so armoured with knowledge, how should they be

burnt, even scorched? And he remembers that he is suffering from acute gastritis, and this woe added to the rest seals his conviction that what he really needs is a ministering angel. He is putting off his journey to England to the middle of November; there she must meet him. "You are only poking fun at me when you say so agreeably that you are frightened of me." (He is never entirely loth to figure as Don Juan). "You know I am ugly and of very captious humour, always absent-minded and often mocking and nasty when I am suffering." *Gouailleur à taper* . . . the old defence; if the world will not take into account that he is sensitive, he will hit back with irony; for the sensitive are a minority, he is sure of it, and must use what weapons they can; so much the worse for his assailant if he (or she) suffers in her turn. "What is there in that which should not inspire trust in me? You will never be smitten with me, do not worry!" Thus he tight-ropes along the edge of the ridiculous, pretending that he will deter her by stigmatizing himself, and not, on the contrary, excite in her a curiosity equal to that she has awakened in him.

And this alternate frankness and coquetry characterises the one no less than the other. "You have both angel and devil in you", he informs her, "but much more of the latter", and he knows that the reproach is half a flattery; then he himself coyly pulls the pathetic string. "Have you not thrown me the bait, poor little fish that I am, and once hooked, you now hold me dancing between heaven and earth as long as you please, ready to cut the line when you have had enough of the game." We come perilously near forgetting his very human grievances; this

language is worthy of an Arnolphe, of one not metaphorically advanced in years. He could have *said* it with less absurdity; and he begins to feel that letters are so many traps for the dignity, and that in spite of his disadvantages, the sooner he makes writing unnecessary, the better. But a real bolt from the blue intervenes. "Lady M[1] . . . told me last night that you were about to be married. That being the case, burn my letters; I burn yours, and so adieu." Another star extinguished in his drab firmament! He cannot bear his women friends to change their state; it brings an inevitable change, for the worse, in his relations with them. And this marriage is but the last drop added to his recent cup of bitterness; it wells over. "*Mariquita de mi vida*" (it is long since he has permitted himself these Andalucian endearments, and he begs that he may keep it up till her marriage day); "I had a superb stone, finely cut, brilliant, sparkling, admirable from every point of view. I thought it a diamond I would not have bartered against that of the Great Mogul. Not a bit of it! I find now that it was but an imitation. A scientific friend of mine has just analysed it. Picture to yourself my disillusion. I spent a deal of time in thinking of this apparent diamond and of the bliss of having found it. Now I must spend quite as long, even longer time in persuading myself that it was a sham jewel." Evidently, when he does contrive to meet his *ami feminin*, as she now calls

[1] Who is this Lady M., how she knew "Lady A. Seymour", whether she was in the plot to keep her identity secret from Mérimée, whether he knew it by the time this letter (No. 7) was written, what is the true date and position of this letter?—these are but a few of the mysteries which persecute anyone who is imprudent enough to attack this thorny problem.

herself, falling in with his caprice, she will, whether she desires or not to play the consoling angel, be the holder of his inmost secrets; and he goes on to tell how, sitting at dinner with his *diamond*, he lashed her with his icy sarcasms, and promises one day to reveal her name "one day, when we are sitting opposite each other, each in our armchair at the fireside."

As he broods over his misfortune, he cannot resist commenting on her intention of marriage. "You have told me, perhaps without meaning to, several things which gave me pleasure, and especially that the husband of a woman resembling yourself would inspire you with a real pity. I find that easy to believe, and I will add that there could be no one unhappier, except a man who were to love you. You must be cold and ironical in your ill-humour, with an insurmountable pride that prevents you from saying: 'I am in the wrong.' Add to that your vigorous disposition which must make you despise tears and complaints. When by the lapse of time and the force of circumstances we become friends, we shall see then which of us two knows best how to torment the other." And as if the fascination of supposing her to be as like himself as two pins had revived his longing to initiate a fresh era of tortures, he falls back into his supplications; "Come soon to Paris, dear Mariquita, and make me fall in love with you. I shall then no longer be bored, and for your trouble, I will make you miserable with my tempers." Her last missive has seemed to him less expansive. She talks no more of the marriage which we may well take to have been a ruse on her part to draw him on, or on the part of her hostile relations to discourage him; what, then, is troubling

her equilibrium, habitually so perfect? "There are in your last notes certain mysterious sentences (but all you write is mysterious) which would seem to indicate some annoyance, or sufferings of the heart. But between ourselves, I do not believe that the organ called the heart operates yet in you. You have pains of the mind, pleasures of the mind, but the organ called heart develops itself only towards the age of twenty-five, on the 46th degree of latitude. I see you lower your lovely black eyebrows and you will say: 'The impertinent man doubts that I have a heart', for it's the great claim in these days. Since so many novels have been written, and so much passionate verse, or verse that passes for being such, every woman protests that she has a heart. Wait a little. When you once and for all have a heart, see what you think of it. You will regret the happy time when you lived only by your head, and you will realise that your present sufferings are mere pin-pricks compared with the dagger-blows which will rain down on you when the time of passions has come."

So he holds forth to her from his lofty platform of experience, until he reaches the eve of his journey to London—December, 1832. She has promised him—"formally and with a tolerably good grace"—that he shall have a portrait of her. (What a quaint odour of Victorianism emanates from the exchange of water-colours and portraits in this Gallic courting!) "This portrait, now,—when shall I have it? Will you give it yourself into my hand? I will come and take it." The intermediaries, obliging though they have been, may as well be dispensed with for once. On the brink of departure his misgivings

and his excitement struggle amusingly. " I am very much afraid that you will take a dislike to me if we see each other often, whereas the contrary will happen to *me*. I am thinking at this moment of the expression of your face, which is a little hard, a lioness though tame." But she writes to exasperate him with the announcement that she will leave the portrait in the care of Mr V. . . ., one of her fellow-conspirators in this blind man's buff. He has small hope, then, of catching a glimpse of her. " I know you too well to expect you to show such a proof of your courage. I count only on chance, which will perhaps bring me a talisman or a bobbin of thread." And he sets out for London. " I shall go and see the elections, I shall eat whitebait at Blackwall, I shall have a fresh glance at the Hampton Court cartoons, and I shall return to Paris. I should be very happy if I were to see you—but I dare not expect it."

He was right, for even if he had not been inextricably caught in the labyrinth of subterfuges, third parties, false names, false whereabouts, the lady's obstinate retreat behind the hedge of her feigned shyness would have rendered useless all the bobbins of thread in the world. The dilettante who crossed the Channel in the winter of 1832 was seething with a roused curiosity far exceeding that of his quest for sensations in 1828; for what we see now to be his life's mainspring would, who knows? be renewed. The portrait reaches him; a long letter is wrapped up with it in a fat and engaging parcel. The picture satisfies his airiest expectations; but the written accompaniment settles nothing. He presses, urges, playfully threatens. " Shall I see you

or not? That is the question. . . . You are, as you will be all your life, torn between your character and your convent habits; the whole trouble arises from that." If she does not make a move, he will seriously go and ask for news of her from the agents who transmit their letters. He is delighted to have her likeness in his possession; for her very boldness in sending proves her confidence in him, and that doubles the pleasure. But why, why can she not cease her manoeuvres and trust him a little further? "Why are you not willing to meet me for a walk, for instance, or even better, at the British Museum, or the Angerstein Gallery?" Silence. "No one in your circle knows me, and my visit would seem very natural. . . . Your principal excuse seems to be your fear of doing something 'improper', as they say here." (He brushes aside her other fear, that of being disappointed on a nearer acquaintance with him, for that would be the first time a woman or any human being had been deterred from satisfying their curiosity by such scruples as those.) "You know, in advance, that I shan't eat you. The thing is therefore only *improper*—if *improper* it be—for the world in general. . . . If this correspondence is to continue without our ever seeing each other, it becomes the most absurd thing imaginable. . . . We can never have a real love for each other. . . . Our acquaintance did not begin in a way which could lead us to that; it has been far too romantic." (Is that not typical?) . . . "Dear Mariquita, you say that you would never want to be *the crown diamond*, and you are quite right; you are worth more than that. . . ." Nothing. Mérimée consoled himself with the spectacle

of M. de Talleyrand's whip-hand on the metropolis and its proudest society, with the uneventful elections, and the sofas of the Athenaeum Club. It was enough to discourage anyone, even a Don Juan.

And then, brusquely, the mists rolled aside; and the next we hear of the adventure shows him confronted with the reality, and writing to Sutton Sharpe from Paris (a roysterer before whom one must keep up one's libertine front) one of the most inimitable letters that ever flowed from his pen. Forgotten, apparently, the shifting vapours of gloom and pleasantries, teasing and demands for sympathy; with one of those rapid Jekyll and Hyde slips into another skin which we expect of him, he presents, once again, his boulevard exterior, Parisian, cynical, hard, and yet supple in his chase after the prey. On his return journey, in the third week of January, 1833, he had disembarked at Calais, and found his way to an address sent him by the lady who had delivered the portrait of "Lady Seymour" (for we now find it to have been a lady, a Mme L. . . . more dust thrown in our eyes). She first gave into his hands an agitated letter from his Unknown, protesting that she could not see him. "Then Mme L. . . . assuming an expression of great seriousness, asked for permission to speak to me with perfect frankness. I trembled for fear that she should confess to have written to me herself (N.B. that she is a very respectable woman of 49). Nevertheless, I replied in the calmest tone I could manage, that I asked nothing better. "You must know then, Monsieur, that the letters which have roused your curiosity are not written by an English lady, but by a French girl." (It would be precious

to be able to gauge exactly Mérimée's feelings at this blow.) "This young person has a lively imagination, she is rash and easily excitable; for the rest, she is full of virtue and honest sentiments. When she wrote to you for the first time, she had but one end in view, that of procuring your autograph for herself. Little by little, she became attracted by the correspondence, then by her correspondent, and—well—it has become a regular passion. In a word, she is mad about you. Her mother and I first let her continue in all this craziness, thinking it of no consequence, but now we are in despair." (Admit, my dear friend, that my position was comic enough.) I thought the moment had come to explain myself clearly. I declared that I would never marry and that I washed my hands of all that aspect of the question, that it was *they* who had come in search of *me*, and so on. I was, I must add, much irritated by Mme L'.s tragic tone. . . ."

But Mme L. hastily smoothed down his angry bristles by explaining that there was no idea at all of marriage, and that all they desired was that he would see the poor child; whereupon she brought out three or four letters from the girl, "whom I will call J.", adds Mérimée. "They would have touched even you, ferocious though you are. Imagine all the folly and the exaltation of the most romantic-minded creature, living in the provinces and convinced that I am a hero certainly as handsome as the sun, and the rest in keeping. In the midst of these exaggerations, there was a core of so real and so well-expressed a sensibility that at one moment I was sneering and the next found myself melting like wax." To these charming *billets doux* Mme L. added a

few lines from J.'s mother, who was, Mérimée observed, completely under her daughter's thumb; she was anxious to know if after the deceit that had been indulged in, he would consent to visit her daughter. "Having perused all these letters, I put on a very serious face and remarked that if the young person was so smitten with me, I thought it my duty not to see her, since it would only be encouraging a passion that must be without results. However, I managed to make her implore me so fervently that I did agree to make the visit." And Mérimée puts all his *pince-sans-rire* humour into one line: "I was delighted to seem forced into a thing I was longing to do." So he set out for Boulogne, and sent a man with a note announcing his intention of calling and begging for an interview. An almost illegible answer returned to him; everything was granted. "I spent an hour in tying my best cravat, and I started off, wondering rather what would happen. I forgot to inform you that Laglandière" (the friend who had accompanied him to England and persuaded him on the journey of his diamond's falseness,) "had put into my head a suspicion of an ambush, and I had taken a stick he had which was furnished with a dagger." (And no doubt nothing would have given him more pleasure than to be met by a Fra Diavolo of Boulogne.) "I walked into a house of decent appearance, and a maid led me into a little room, lit by only one candle a long way from the mantelpiece. Before it there was seated a woman, whose features I could not distinguish. As I came in, she rose as if propelled by a spring and fell back again at once, putting her handkerchief to her face. I held out my hand, she

gave me hers, and I sat down. Observe that by the particular situation of the candle, I was in its full light and I could only see J.'s *outline*, for her back was turned to it. We talked; she had a very attractive voice. We spoke of a hundred thousand things. She seemed to me timid, but witty. At the end of a quarter of an hour's conversation, I asked her to put the candle between us. She refused, saying that she would not dare to talk to me any more; but, after another quarter of an hour, she ended by consenting to it. I saw then a beautiful person of about twenty years old, dark, with fine black eyes *à la French* (!), admirable eyebrows, black hair, etc. Add to that a foot like a finger, in an exquisite slipper of black satin. I became at once half as amiable again. We were both leaning toward the fire, and she had this foot stretched forward with an inch or two of leg that was in perfect harmony with it. "It is so long", said I, "since I have seen pretty feet, that I cannot feast my eyes sufficiently on yours." "Really, do you like them?" she answered, and she moved her foot towards me with a childish coquetry. I took this foot in my hand, and while we were engaged on some discussion of lofty morality (we had reached that point) I don't know what demon tempted me, I raised the foot to my lips and imprinted on it a tender kiss.

Never did a Dutchman receiving in full paunch a Paixhan[1] shell seem more suddenly annihilated than poor J. . . . She withdrew her foot, her head sank on her breast, and she turned crimson. One would have had to be a tiger to continue. I am

[1] A French general who invented a special type of cannon.

no tiger. We talked of other things, and I retired after two hours of chaste, though quite tender, conversation. She purports to be coming to Paris in a few months' time; my virtue will have to make a powerful effort to resist then. J.'s letters now follow each other in quick succession, and I am beginning myself to feel more than a little in love with her. Also I give her advice, as you can well imagine. . . ."

And the account ends on the same Valmontian note. Gone the tall and stately English woman, strolling through her park or bowing to her acquaintances in the Mall; in her place, just Jenny Dacquin, the daughter of a Boulogne notary. The family are not burdened with this world's goods; and her father, a lawyer, has recently died leaving an inheritance full of tangles. Jenny, who has the good fortune to possess a thorough grounding in English from an early instruction across the Channel, and has had endless opportunities both of striking up valuable friendships and of increasing her expertness in their tongue among the wealthy English colony that transformed Boulogne after the close of the Napoleonic Wars into a fashionable resort, has found herself obliged to make use of her gifts. Agreeable to look at, intelligent and of a pleasant and refined nature, she has had small difficulty in insinuating herself as companion into the family of Lord X. . . (" *un Lord haut titré*, as M. Lefebvre calls him,[1]) and there she spends her summers, *en un antique chateau aux immenses dépendances, avec une liberté plus grande agrémentee de plaisirs champêtres*,[2] all this in the county of Kent.

[1] *L'Inconnue de Prosper Mérimée.* [2] M. Lefebvre.

Such then, was this Sleeping Beauty of this groping hunt through the forest of sentimentalism and innocent intrigue, when Mérimée reached her in 1833; and he, who complained that their epistolary friendship had been too "romantic" could not repress the movement, not exactly of disillusion, but of half-cynical resignation which took the form of that very eighteenth-century letter to Sharpe. For he could not but have felt his frank exposition of his moods and amorous martyrdoms to be an imprudence before a rational mind *à la French*, as he would say: "Lady Algernon", a denizen of romantic glades, or the fatal beauty of a Piccadilly salon, could safely lend an ear to his plaints: and if Mérimée escaped the greater part of the fevers of his time, he was nevertheless not averse, in spite of his habitual contempt for his coevals, to indulging, at the age of twenty-nine, in a little quiet romanticism before a sympathetic audience, and preferably a feminine one. But whatever fear may have haunted him, on the unveiling of his incognita's true self, that he had betrayed himself too far before one who by the very virtue of being a compatriot of Marivaux was less impressionable than an English lady of high renown, more of an adversary in the amorous lists, he went no further than that one shrug, that one hint of his disappointment. For consolation was easy; the "splendid black eyes", the sylph-like figure, the infinitesimal foot in its satin sheath, these were gains not to be discounted; and though he was too much of a feminist to prize a bluestocking for her intellectual qualities alone, it was all the same extremely pleasant to feel that if the fancy seized him to discourse on hieroglyphics or Arabic

roots, Rubens or Greek statues, he would not be met with a feigned comprehension, or a yawn. As for the *diamond*, whether or no we credit him with an absolute sincerity in his grief, in all probability Jenny, a woman and inquisitive and not yet jealous, was an ideal recipient for his moans, and if they did not succeed in encircling his head with the aureole of one of Love's crucified, they would awaken her curiosity; sympathy would be useful as a first crop, before the ultimate harvest he was hoping to reap.

We can follow them, if we wish, through the attacks and retreats, the upbraidings and touching gratitudes that star the course of this strange love. But for our pains, we shall but be rewarded with a piquant and delightful story, a sop for our indiscretion, an idyll where sophistication and interest fight with genuine feeling; we shall traverse no new ground. For if Boulogne revealed Jenny Dacquin, the game of hide and seek of those twelve letters written before their candlelight interview has delivered her correspondent into our hands; and his life-long throwing of dust into the eyes of those impertinent enough to pry into his character was rendered once and for all null and void by her manoeuvres. So unblemished is their photography of the fantastically intertwined sarcasm and pathos, selfishness and flowing wit, gallantry and ill-humour which go to compose him, that we may venture, with the knowledge we have of her tricksy ways also, to sketch beforehand the whole evolution of their battle, their peace-making and their tranquil alliance. "We shall see which of us can best torment the other", he has said, for he employs the terrible scalpel of his critical sense alike on her and

on himself; and the estimate we have formed of that prophecy's truth is not short of the reality.

Between 1833 and 1842, except for two letters, one from Avignon, the other from Toulon, which may well belong to 1834, the year of Mérimée's first Inspector's tour in the South, there is a long blank. We may suppose what we will. All her critics are unanimous in remarking that for a woman anxious to put the curious off the track of truth, Mlle Dacquin adopted a stratagem of a short-sightedness odd in so intelligent a person. The two letters of 1834 contain mere descriptions of the dirtiness that adorns the Marseillaises, a Roman statue at Vienne, and other aesthetic joys; that of the first of September opens: "It's many days since I had news of you, and an almost equally long time has elapsed since my last letter to you"; the second, of a few days after, concludes with a hope that he may find a line from her waiting at Carcassonne, and the enclosing of a flower from a "thorny shrub that grows in the neighbourhood of Marseilles and has a very sweet odour of violets". And setting the non-committal amiability of these solitary screeds against the complete absence of all others in that nine years' interval, the subtle have deduced that it could not be otherwise, and that these two have survived because they alone revealed nothing. They are not worsted by the discovery that in October 1842, Mérimée wrote: "If I make no mistake, we have seen each other six or seven times in six years, and by adding up the minutes, we can have spent three or four hours together, most of which time was spent in saying nothing to each other", nor by another chance rift in the darkness, a word from Paris in

February of the same year. "You seem to me to be even more of a coquette than in the year of grace, 1840. It was in the month of December, and you wore stockings of striped silk; that is all I remember." They harp on the unbroken silence of the years between the encounter at Boulogne, and 1836, when the first of the six meetings may have taken place; and they observe that much can happen in three years, even if a lover is scouring France in search of antiquities and his flame is quietly burning in Kent.

Let us leave them wagging their fingers, and pass on to the year of revelations, to 1842, when Mlle Dacquin found herself abruptly liberated from what had not been a disagreeable servitude. Two legacies, one from a near relation, the other from a distant cousin, a bachelor ("Your friend who had this bright idea must have been in love with you; you will never admit it, loving mystery as you do", gibed Mérimée), left her free to choose a new and independent mode of existence. "Why should you not visit Rome and Naples, and have a look at the pictures and the sun? You are worthy of understanding Italy, and you will return enriched by some ideas and sensations." She was entirely of his thinking; but by the time the project was carried out, much water had rolled under Seine bridges. She stayed at Boulogne long enough to wind up her affairs and to let her apartment, and came to Paris. There she installed herself in the Rue de l'Oratoire, a discreet alley opposite the Louvre; and there, one day, as she was taking the air on the boulevard, Mérimée caught sight of her. He had written to her at the new address;

the intervening months had left him a host of anecdotes to entertain her with; Spain, in 1840, with its "grotesque revolution" and its bull-fights, his acting sultan over a harem of six ladies "of whom the eldest was not more than 36 years old", Malta, Athens, Ephesus, and Constantinople in the preceding summer, all this had not left many opportunities for letter-writing; he had been longing to see her, he had preluded the happy renewal of their relations with offers of a blade of grass from Thermopylae, of rose and jasmine preserve, an *édition de luxe* of his last volume and a Turkish mirror; he had declared himself aged ("my firman called my hair, dove's locks, a pretty Oriental metaphor for saying an unpleasant thing"); "and you, *querida*,—dear one—are you changed?" She had countered with a purse which he hoped her white hands had embroidered, and a letter which drew from him his old reproaches; nevertheless, he had followed his custom of tempering his abuse with flatteries, regretted that he could not escort her to Marseille in September and eat figs and *bouillabaisse* with her, and begged her to wish very hard for his election to the Academy, since what she wished always came true. And then, she had passed him in the street, and he had not dared to approach her—fool that he was, for she had seemed to him handsomer and slimmer than ever, and Constantinople had not unearthed for him eyes of a more lustrous black!

And gradually between his self-condemnation and her fencing, his exasperation broke out again. "You have remained a child in many things, and, in addition to that, you are now become

a hypocrite. You do not know how to hide your first impulses, but you think you can remedy that by a mass of little devices. What do you gain by it? . . . You think you have pride; I am very sorry, but you have just a mean little vanity worthy of a religious devotee. . . . Hypocrisy, at which you are quite proficient, though you practise it for fun, will end by playing you a trick; it will become genuine in you. As for coquetry, the inseparable companion of that nasty vice you have fallen into, you have always been flagrantly guilty of it. It suited you when you modified it by a certain frankness, and by heart and imagination. Now . . . now, what shall I say to you? You have very beautiful black hair and a fine cashmeer shawl, and you are always pleasant when you want to be. . . . The figure of rhetoric you think you have invented has been known for a long time. In Greek one could give it a new and very baroque name. In French, it is known under the no less pompous head of *la menterie*. With me, use it as little as possible, and do not overdo the use of it with others. You must keep it for great occasions. . . . I fancy I have made you several compliments. You are doubtless fishing for others when you say that you have neither heart nor imagination; too much denying of one and the other for some definite reason, can bring bad luck on you. It is wrong to play with that."

The world he lives in, of course, comes in for its share of blame; Jenny's defects are but a fresh error in the deplorable scheme of the universe. "You cannot think with what a disgust the society of to-day fills me; one would imagine that it has sought out all the combinations

possible for increasing the mass of boredom necessary to the world's working." No one understands that he spent three years in a rather dreary round of dissipations, out of curiosity, naturally —anything to escape the diurnal platitude, for more often than not he has found decent company "mortally boring". "In two places I feel happy, or at least, have the vanity to think myself at home; first, with people without pretentions whom I have known for a long time; secondly, in a Spanish *venta*, with muleteers and peasants of Andalucia." And only in forwarding her expeditions into the realm of classical scholarship that he loves does he ever forget the slings and arrows that are directed particularly against him. Nearly every page is studded with Greek words and instructions how to pronounce them, with advice on the best translation of Homer, with comments on Greek patriotism and Greek novels. "After Homer, you can take to reading the tragic poets in all tranquillity, they will interest you, and you will like them because you have a taste for the beautiful, τὸ καλόν, that feeling the Greeks possessed to a high degree, and which we, the happy few, inherit from them." And, if, as he foretells, with a little patience and a bent such as she has, she bids fair to become a Mme Dacier, we are given to understand that he would find that not at all unpleasant.

So all through the winter of 1842 and right into the following year they fought with each other. One day Mérimée would lure her into seeing *La Cenerentola* from his box at the Opéra, pandering to propriety by insisting that she should bring a male chaperon of her family, and thus blocking the way for any excuse. As he expected, this artifice merely brought down on

his head a fresh rain of counter-ruses and pretexts for avoiding him. But his *amour-propre* and the fascination she exercised over him steeled him to renew his wiles. Her Italian expedition had been put off to an indefinite date. "We must go one day together to the Museum and look at the Italian pictures; it will be a compensation for the journey you have missed, and the advantage of having me for a cicerone is inestimable." Of that, in spite of his irony, we can have no doubt; and Mlle Dacquin must have been fully aware of it. Twenty years after, when she ended by making the long-dreamed-of tour of the Italian cities, she wrote to a young cousin who had made her house in Paris his constant haunt, a number of letters which show to what extent she had profited from those brief hours devoted to her cicerone of the Louvre to form her taste and her manner of describing the beauties of Art and Nature. These letters contain even more glaring evidences of her chameleon habit; are there not instances where a phrase, a whole paragraph has crept on to the paper, a literal transcription of some recent observation that had reached her from her learned friend, as he took his solitary way through his private or professional tours of Europe? And since it is seldom easy to decide what a woman of personality really desires, still less to read it in her actions, we are sorely tempted to believe that this enrichment of her aesthetic qualities was at least one of the advantages she had promised herself to win from the grudgingly accorded interviews of 1842 and 1843. To grudge them was doubtless part of her tactics; for we have no means of knowing whether, in spite of his frank-

ness concerning his *diamond*, Mérimée had ever breathed a word to Jenny of his *liaison* with the wife of a well-known official attached to the July Monarchy and later to the Imperial rêgime, which had begun in 1837 and lasted some fifteen years; and since no single mention of jealousy or pique on Jenny's part is to be traced in his letters, we can but conclude that her astuteness alone led her to goad him with perpetual shiftings of mood, with lightning evasions and specious argumentation worthy of a Perichole.

*Femme de tête* she was and remained, mistress of her most trifling thoughts. In vain did she once confess (it was a case of admiring the scenery of the Swiss lakes); "I make a great show, personally, of being calm, even cold, but I am cold as a volcano is cold, calm like the whirlwind." Words, words! She had snared the mystifier with a mystification; she had studied Diane de Turgis for the scene in her room at Boulogne; and now, whatever the charm of the summer walks through the woods of Meudon and Saint-Ouen, of her companion's infinite culture and wit, of the afternoons spent seated under a chestnut-tree while he read aloud an English novel or wove her an Oriental legend as only he knew how, she must not forget that she had black eyes and black hair, and that *la beauté du diable* of a Colomba, spiced with cruelty and sudden rages, was the sole chain that could bind him. So she rang the changes on benignity and coldness, resentment and softening; while she listened and commented with a real intelligence (for that, too, was precious to him), she absorbed and assimilated; and then, if by chance she had allowed herself to be overcome even a little

by the melting sunlight and his lapses out of the display of variegated knowledge into a tentative amorousness, she would take her pen on the following day, and cool the ardour she had unwillingly roused with a douche of icy withdrawals and reproofs. And the lover, because he "liked to be spoilt", and because it is harder to deal with a live Carmen (even a Carmen of Boulogne) than to invent one, would be thrown back into his disgruntled perplexity, groan at the blots on her and everyone's character, feel thoroughly ill-used, and resorting to his narrow, sardonic philosophy, accept the blows, while, human as he was he evolved another plot for luring her back into amenity and enticing her into their woods:

> "But do not let us quarrel any more,
> No, my Lucrezia; bear with me for once.
> Sit down, and all shall happen as you wish."

He would not touch her, he would behave like a statue, as she had requested, no one would be more proper.

"You are so amiable when you want to be! Why do you so often show yourself horrid? . . . There is in your to-day's letter, among a pile of hard words and sombre, frigid reflections, something which rings true. "I think I never loved you so much as yesterday." You might have added: "I love you less to-day" . . . You are right when you say our walk was a dream. But is it not a great happiness to be able to dream when one is inclined? Since you dictate everything, it is for you to say when we may begin again. . . . Every time we meet, there is a crust of ice between us. . . . Because you do not feel as I do, you want the impossible, for me to

feel as you do. . . . You put all kinds of thoughts into my head the other evening at the Italian opera, with your rainbow-coloured dress. But with me, you do not need coquetry. I do not like you better in rainbow than in black. . . . It seems to me that every day you become more selfish. In 'we', you never look for anything but yourself. . . . You have often reproached me with being indifferent to everyone; I suppose you simply meant I was undemonstrative. When I explode out of my natural calm, it means that I am suffering. . . . There are two persons in you. One, the better one, is all heart and all soul. The other is a pretty statue, well-polished by the world, well draped in silk and cashmere; it is a charming machine whose workings are arranged in the cleverest possible way. When one thinks one is addressing the first, one finds the second. . . . Someone more philosophical than I would take the happiness when it comes and not be disturbed by the trouble. It is a fault of my nature that when I am hurt, I remember all the former trouble; but, also, I remember all the happiness when I am happy. . . . In spite of my ill-humour, I prefer to see you with your great indifferent airs than not at all. . . ." And as he persisted in their meetings and could not shake off either his own resentment or his desire to be near her and to prolong their mutual torturing, he summed it all up one day; "I begin to know you by heart, and I think that is what often saddens me. There is in you a mixture of oppositions and contradictions strange enough to try the temper of a saint." For gradually they had drawn near to that lovers' crossway, at which

weariness and jangled nerves ordain that a resolution must be made. The autumn had come, with rains and overcast heavens and a host of occupations; *nous n'irons plus au bois.* . . . "Yes, we are very, very foolish. We should have felt it earlier. We should have seen earlier how in everything and on every question our ideas and sentiments are opposed to each other. . . . Forgive me, I beseech you, for I also have suffered. I would like to have left you a better memory of me. . . . Never have I been with you such as I should like to have been, or rather such as I intended to appear in your eyes. . . . Taking it all in all, perhaps you will come to see only the fine aspect of our folly, to remember only the happy moments we enjoyed in each other's company. . . . As for myself, I have not the least reproach to make you."

That time of conflicting relief and regret, the re-descending tranquillity after the thrill of storm, when the pale, washed expanse of sky distils a peace not yet empty of vibrations, had fallen on them; and it lasted for twenty-five years. When he had completed his round of hypocritical fawning on the Academicians, had become entitled to the coveted green coat, she hid behind a neighbour's hat as he addressed the learned conclave, and watched him blow her a sly kiss with his finger-tips; when his arduous inspections took him to Nîmes, he wrote an enchanting letter, telling her how a "charming bird, a little bigger than a tomtit, with a flax-white body and red, black, and white wings" had seemed to pursue him round the arena, flying noiselessly, and even accompanied him into a dark corridor, still

clinging to his steps; and remembering how the Duchess of Buckingham had seen her husband under the form of a bird on the day of his assassination, he had heaved a sigh of relief when a word from Jenny had arrived, written on the very afternoon of the strange event. When Paris shivered under the hail of French bullets in 1848 and Frenchmen lay writhing on the barricades, he found time in his soldier's fatigue to advise her on the most prudent place of retirement; hers was the sympathy that most touched him when he had let loose the shafts of his indignation on Libri's oppressors, and was faced with the prospect of standing up in court and affronting *la fleur de la canaille*. And just as he reserved for Panizzi his sagest and most diverting commentaries on the flux of politics and the international drama, so up to his last hour, Jenny Dacquin might be sure that the flower of his private life's small obligations and cares and enjoyments was plucked like the grass blade of Thermopylae, and unfailingly despatched to her.

For her genuine culture and the habit formed in those greenwood wanderings of scattering the seed of his vast and never-wearisome learning on the soil of her alert brain, had made her indispensable; and affection, that comfortable warmth stealing through the embers of passion, held him to her. His colds and asthma and sleeplessness (for it is easy to forget that a good half of Mérimée's life was chequered with ill-health); the high-coloured impressions of his seemingly endless travels; the praying-mantis that he would watch for hours stretched out on the sand at Cannes, his foundling cat that he would walk a mile to feed; his books and essays; the fiasco of

*Arsène Guillot*; his work on the life of Don Pédro, concerning which he must have her opinion; Emile Augier's suggestion that they should make a big melodrama out of *Les Faux Démétrius*; the ticklish problem of *Lokis*, to shock or not to shock, which she resolved for him to the satisfaction of his listeners at the reading, if not to his own, in such a way that "it remained doubtful that the bear had been so far in his assaults as to upset an illustrious genealogy"; the pleasure of hearing her views on Aristophanes, or chaffing her about that dreadful *Salammbo*, or insisting that she shall take up Thiers' History as a corrective to Victor Hugo, Tourguenev as an antidote to Baudelaire; all this she must have come to look on as her prerogative and one of unending charm. Was there, perhaps, a curious stirring of guiltiness in the depths of her heart, as if she had cheated him of something and he had not only been too chivalrous to bear her ill-will, but had overbrimmed the measure of her reward in a coinage she had too firmly insisted on? That lies between them, in the limbo of their consciences. Suffice it that we have Mérimée's word: "If ever boredom and blue devils get the better of me, I think of our days of gay intimacy, and I know of nothing to compare with them." When the slaughter of 1870 laid him low at Cannes as if the Prussian armies had been possessed of a long-reaching scythe, Jenny Dacquin wrote to her cousin the only words concerning her secret that in her long correspondence with him ever passed between them: "I keep the most delicious memory of him; time has never put a blemish on that unrivalled intimacy. It is so rare that human ties endure without some

taint of bitterness that I am grateful to have seen this one fade without a single regret or afterthought. . . ." Her friend, secret and delicate to the last, instead of making his bequest to her figure openly in his will, had written to her in the summer of that calamitous year, and as if to symbolize in a concluding gesture not only that lifelong setting-aside for her of all that was most himself, but the paradox of his eclectic youth and the ambiguous glitter of his fame in the firmament of Romanticism, he had told her: "I have put a little order in one of my bookshelves, and I am keeping you the letters of Mme de Sévigné in twelve volumes, and a little Shakespeare." The Grand Siècle and its exquisite moderation, the wild genius of the first Romantic . . . volumes and contradiction and all fell to the vindictive flames of the Commune, when the rue de Lille was besprinkled with paraffin and there remained of the apartment at No. 52 just the bronze faun picked up by an old acquaintance. But the white-haired lady of Boulogne needed no final tribute. Her own house in the rue Jacob had been spared, save for a few casual bullets in the bedroom; but even without the forty years of wit and tenderness whose record remained to her in that vigorous hand-writing, she was able to keep laid up in the herbs of a gratitude she only could estimate, "the most delicious memory". . .

## II

"To conceal one's life with great care, and to be handed over naked and defenceless, is a cruel punishment, and I do not know what Mérimée had done to deserve it." Thus Maxime du Camp, and the

sympathetic words are the more precious for their rarity, for no one has been severer and gilded the pill of Mérimée's faults less than he. But it is difficult to see how, Mask or no Mask (and that was a further provocation), Mérimée could long have escaped the appetite of the modern world for seeing thrown into the arena even the most jealous defenders of their own privacy. Our vulgar and indiscriminate love of stripping men of talent and levelling them with the common norm out of their hated individuality down to the most quotidian likeness of ourselves, would be less excusable were it not that many of them, no sooner compressed, soar up elastically into the spheres set apart for them, and leave us more than ever aware of our inferior clay. At a first glance Mérimée threatens less of a blow to our conceit than most of his contemporaries. And yet, when we have laid to our soul the flattering unction that he will be an easy study, not encumbered with spirituality or religious ecstasies or lofty poetry, nor haunted by social gospels, and we have pulled every rag of mystery off his sentimental and literary life, he can keep the satisfaction of baulking us still and remaining much of the enigma that we found at the outset. For personality, like poetry, is not dissipated by being explained away; our wonder merely shifts its ground, and the phenomenon does not strike us as less bizarre. The dividing line where sincerity shades into mockery, the exact point of fusion where his certitudes melt into his questionings and we find that fragile, negative shade we call irony, tantalizes us no less at the close, to say nothing of the doubts we are often

obsessed with, as to whether he always told the whole truth of himself, and if he could always perceive it. But even in his indecision, his enforced halt on the frontier between greatness and a superb intelligence, his complexity chains our admiration; for over that brilliant mind's surface, as in a narrow mirror pellucid and unceasingly passive, move all the jostling shapes of a time fruitful in immense upheavals and blind transformations; they float across that glassy expanse in the admirable frame, and not one is blurred, not one is missing.

Passive—the word has happily fallen. Something of the passivity that dwells about the mind of the precocious adolescent, as if the world were too strong a draught and must not be seized and drained, but savoured with prudent sips. Mérimée was never compelled to attack it in any other way. The only child of a married couple who, without ever enjoying real affluence, yet never fell on hard times, he found himself the core of those two fond, if not emotional, people's orderly existence; his studies and his ripening were sheltered against all the gales from outside; not for him the chemist's shop nor the schoolmaster's chair, nor even the attic in Montmartre beloved of Murger's heroes. It is said that at the close of the Second Empire, writers had begun to be classified under two heads; those who wore white gloves, and those who did not. Mérimée was virtually born in white gloves. D'Haussonville has told how his mother "made it her business to set him free from the preoccupations of material life, for which she knew him to be totally unadapted"; and those supple, almost unperceived dodgings from one governmental

niche to another, which might make political purists grimace, are not to be attributed to anything else but the instinct developed in him to keep a roof over his head that would not often stand in need of repairs.

Only when it was all over could it be observed with what ingeniousness he had avoided taking part in the drama, and yet rarely been absent from the wings. To stand aside, that was his motto. To reserve himself, to let life be unrolled before him, come to him with offers so flamboyant and diverse that the discrimination of his choice seemed to him the finer, never to choose too much, never to be blindly convinced of the choice's merit, or at least never to show it; all his energies were centred on maintaining this balance, with an effort as imperceptible as might be. And because that concentration on preserving his artist's vision of things was often disturbed, we have those railings at Destiny, those cries of longing to remould the world nearer to his heart's desire, to smooth away its absurd excrescences; and when the rebel clay would not abandon its touching shapelessness, he would shrug eloquent shoulders and for sole commentary sweep his cloak of disdain over them, and stalk through the general imbecility as much like Don Juan on the Styx as a big, sensual nose and a "peasant's head" would allow. Because his pose was not all drapery, because his reaction to a century full of monstrous and painful births of the spirit was a genuine one, we feel for him, we who live in another, where, as a French writer has boldly said: "There is only one aristocrat, the artist, and democracy

hates him."[1] But the obligation posterity labours under, to consider the sweeps of change and evolution in history or in the minds of the great who represent its succeeding periods, and not to dwell on isolated phenomena, save in so far as they cast a light on their time, prevents the general judgment from being as charitable as those who are merely curious of rare souls. Posterity sees Mérimée as Gérôme has left him in his picture of the reception of the Siamese envoys at Fontainebleau; standing stiffly and correctly in the shade of the background, while the brilliant assembly watches the procession advance; and posterity, even if it goes to the pains of singling him out, does not long honour him with her attention when she finds that the glitter of the ambassadors' robes and strange hats evokes no Oriental image in his mind, but that he is engaged in wondering how they propose, once the bowl with the letters has been left in the Emperor's hand, to retreat on all fours; for posterity is perforce all seriousness, and knows the humorous to be only an infinitesimal facet of the jewel, Life. And thus Mérimée is left effaced in the throng, punished for his habit of seeing humanity as a crawling creature, and of fearing ever to look at it in its upright plainness, in case it should suddenly, with a Caliban's laugh at his credulity, resume its natural position.

For he was always afraid of something. "Yes", we hear him excuse himself in 1842, "I see things, perhaps, too positively, but I have been *escarmentado*[2] for having seen them too poetically." In other words,

[1] Elie Faure. *L'Art Moderne*. The writer is thinking of the *painter*, but Mérimée may well come under the same head.

[2] Escarmentado—punished very severely.

life has shown him (when? for even at the *cênâcle* of Delécluze, we know him to have offered just the same armoured front to the world) that the clouds of glory he thinks to have trailed into the world must quickly become an orderly grey, since gold and celestial blue clash too cruelly with its drabness; and being, unfortunately for himself, a man of sense, he complies, but with the mental reservation "Never again"; he has learned his lesson. And at once, like all artists, he looks round for means of escape. He has, as David d'Angers wrote in his diary, "an excessive confidence in his own merit", and self-centred like a child, he fears and despises the hand that has cuffed him, will make it a point of honour to prove how wrongly he has been corrected, and since it is not his business to find good points in his elders, intends to keep well out of range and brood over retaliation.

So he begins by ordering his expression, concocting an attitude; he is far from having that precious manner of transforming a tail-coat into the insignia of a whole class set apart from the herd, but no matter—his clothes will be of a perfect cut, so as to leave no loophole *there* for ridicule; his voice will express a well-bred incapacity for emotion; he will accede to the privilege of retailing a scabrous anecdote, or making a bold compliment, so that no one dares to be offended (except women, who like to be shocked), so impeccable is the even tone, the *mot juste*. Thus armed, he flatters himself he will march through life preserved from the enemy. But for greater security, he will narrow down the enclosure he has built and fence it in against the assaults of *La Bêtise*. Literature, Art and Pleasure, those shall be his weapons of

defence; and if any of them slip in his hand and wound him, or grow blunt and inefficient, so much the worse for him; he will have put up a fight. Of the three, Literature will be the sharpest and the most brilliant. What pleasure to fool the Romantics to the top of their bent, and to demonstrate that their new universe, lately unclosed like a magnificent tropical bloom, is fragile and possible to counterfeit like all the inventions of man's undisciplined fantasy! They are chasing after the will-o'-the-wisp of a renovated drama, seeking a shock of passions and flaming colours fetched from the remotest corners of the globe, from the inexhaustible store that History is found to have opened; gracefully, he seizes it by one wing and copies it with a rapid deftness that leaves his rivals gasping. Spain, the Indies, South America, the Balkans, the Near East, he knows them far more exactly than these blundering poetasters, who gush absurdly over them; he can devise an intrigue, a costume, sketch a personality, paint with as audacious a fancy as any of them and surpass them in wit; and, in his own eyes, he has the supreme advantage of being minutely aware of what he is playing at, infallible for detail, unassailable by the vapours of a luxuriant imagination, pitiless in unearthing an error of scholarship or taste.

One by one, he falls on subtle vengeances. With each faultless work, carried out on a pattern accepted by the innovators, he plants an adroit banderillo. *La Jacquerie* enables him to knock some of the specious Gothic ornamentation of the Middle Ages they spend their time in belauding, and to show them as they were, a time of "atrocious customs"; Walter Scott comes

in for a not over kindly dig from *The Chronique de Charles IX* (a dig openly administered this time and not protected by the wily mantilla or the Dalmatian cap), and religion, that incurable, incomprehensible hypocrisy, meets with its first trouncing. Hoffmann and the *Romancero del Cid* he can nonchalantly imitate; *L'Enlèvement de la Redoute* is soon there to pull the sham glory and heroics off the face of war, *Tamango* to gibe at Wilberforce while it seems to take his humanitarian side; a few *Letters from Spain* will be added to hint casually that there is more dirt and death than serenades over the Pyrenees; *Les Ames du Purgatoire* will go one better than Byron, *Carmen* will rival *Mateo Falcone* and *Colomba* in pointing the grand old moral of "Natural Man" and his superiority (especially viewed from the dilettante's angle) while *La Partie de Trictrac*, *La Double Méprise*, and *Le Vase Etrusque*, even *Arsène Guillot*, the most human, prove with what undiscriminating and glacial calm Fate selects her prey, and how, when she has done, few happy endings remain to appease tender hearts. And with a kind of additional insolence which is at the same time a literary artifice, his tales are set forth with a starkness of profile, a minimum of phrase, a visible contempt for embroideries that stamp them at once as something simultaneously refined and brutal, well-bred and yet intensely personal in their impersonality; something that only the intelligent will fully degustate, that the stupid will lay aside in favour of a nebulous sensibility, or a piece of rodomontade, or some insipid French verse.

By the time he has wearied of this bull-baiting and this consummate, unexceptionable manner

of driving home what he sees as the truth, he will have created for himself a fine reputation for Satanism which will more effectively than all else blind the unthinking to his hidden sufferings, and make him a popular figure among the revellers of the boulevard; the low-burning candles, the glasses on the floor, the stereotyped pleasantries of the courtezan, all that is not always very gay; no matter! it serves as a shield. Before long he will decide that novels represent a purposeless waste of valuable imagination, since, even if they are appreciated, it is for qualities he never desired them to possess, dramatic event and local colour, surface values; *La Bêtise* has found a chink in his armour. So he retreats yet further, entrenches himself behind a spikier fortification than ever, and sharpens his two-edged sword of History and Art. He is prodigiously gifted; a marvellous memory, the ability to discern the beautiful in a desert of mediocrity whose uttermost and dryest corner he is familiar with, a knowledge of four or five languages with their literatures—these are rare possessions and he is impregnably bastioned in them. What matter if his archaeological reports are of a bare frigidity which discourages all but the technicians? They are honest, penetrating, scrupulously impartial, free from clap-trap and false sentiment about Gothic fanes and the light that gilds Ionic columns. What matter if he alone is satisfied with his historical reconstitutions of Demetrius and Caesar and Don Pedro, if the tasteless prefer Michelet and Thierry, even Chateaubriand? To have set down the unvarnished, grey Truth, to have evoked serene leaders

of men, adventurers at their game of twisting humanity round their little finger; that is all a writer of distinction should care to have done.

And as if to convey the final impression that, in any case, none of that is of the remotest importance and that he has long forgotten the *cochons d'Andalousie* whose virtue she once illuminated, he conducts his declining years to the most conventional close, hanging about palaces and putting on Court breeches as if he were the last person ever to have suggested that a Spanish *venta* was more diverting than Compiègne, and with a crowning disdain, allowing the world to label him courtier and buffoon. And when one day he pauses to take breath in this tenacious outwitting of the eternal foe, why! the negative pleasures he has painfully worked for bring a taste of dust to his lips; and in a flash of that white light of criticism he has always turned on things, he catches a glimpse of his real shape; a timid and selfish personality, an exquisite but narrow mind, too positive in its strictures on Life, having scoffed at its mystery without discovering anything to replace it but a too careful epicureanism; the most French of Frenchmen, and yet unable to abandon himself, like his compatriots, to the floods pouring down over the dykes burst by Rousseau and Goethe, Byron and Scott; the product of a middle-class childhood and youth, against whose safe background he has been able to play at aristocrat and outlaw and debauchee, as if all were as hollow as the masks of his own private theatricals; incapable of giving himself wholly and without reserve to an art or a human being, from an egotistical revulsion against the imperfections of

everything and the pains he must take to tolerate them; and a blear legend is scrolled on the pediment of the exiguous temple he has built for himself—*A Quoi Bon?* There remain only, gleaming through the fogs of "boredom and blue devils" those rare and blessed occasions when he has, as if by absent-mindedness, lost sight of the odiousness of living and the ineluctable fact of his being a Parisian and therefore filled with a terror of ridicule or misplaced enthusiasm, in the contemplation of a cathedral and the secret of its beauty, in the company of his chosen friends and, most of all, in his passions.

For if, as Blaze de Bury assures us, "*la gauloiserie*, a taste for the scabrous, was ingrained in him," we cannot but thank the Fates on his behalf. We may well believe that he needed no Stendhal to encourage him in making himself more than agreeable to womenfolk, and if he laughed at his friend's military crudeness, it was the manner and not the end of view that his more orderly, but not less sensual mind found somewhat grotesque. That sensuality may have earned him the reputation of ne'er-do-weel which he made a pretence of wearing as a plume in his cap, and in reality deplored; but its presence in his mental composition meant that there at least, that rigid hold he maintained over himself broke often and was not easily recovered; and the constant *détente*, that spiritual overflow which characterizes the works of the greatest writers, that unselfconscious fertility which could never invade and permeate that of Mérimée, poured down that single channel and enriched at least the remote and secret territory which he so unsleepingly guarded against peering

eyes. And knowing that as we do, we can readily believe his candid explanation of riotous years, that he threw himself into the town pleasures *uniquement par tristesse, et un peu peut-etre par curiosité*, and be sure that that frigid experimentation was but the inevitable reverse of a very fine medal, incapable of depreciating its true worth.

For if certain women saw the wilfully repelling side of him, the ingenious façade, others, whatever the shortcomings on his side and on their own, were privileged to see the sincerest and most ardent, the best he could offer. Even when we have discovered that he was, underneath his armour of bluff and intelligence, as human as most men, and more than some; that he was as accessible to tenderness and pity as anyone, shedding tears before the coffins of children and feeling pangs of sympathy for the old working women of Paris; that the men who called him friend, and even his critics, put the fullest meaning into the word, outdoing each other in testimonials to his unfailing kindness—"The best of sons, the surest and most obliging of friends."—"The best fellow in the world"—"Always the same in acquaintance, and absolutely sure"—that he suffered not only from jealousy and unrequited passion and the rest of the private ills that strong personalities are heir to, but agonized with his country's agony, a far less common and nobler trait; even then, we cannot but feel that his constant refusal to admit these weaknesses froze the warmth he might have secured from a frank surrender to them, and we remember his strange remarks on "the impossibility of friendships with men", and how, quite late in his life, the amiable Octave Feuillet visited him one

morning in his room at Compiègne, and only after cutting through the habitual crust of ice that surrounded his manner could he penetrate to the charming individual beneath it—that very crust of ice which Mérimée had accused Jenny Dacquin of being unwilling to abandon. But "the mist is dispelled, when a woman appears," and the letters to Jenny remain to prove that women alone could melt him, and that with them he struggled ever in vain to hold back his yielding pride.

For he adored them, as Stendhal adored them. "I never knew him except in love, or imagining himself to be." That comment, like others of those passed by Mérimée on the amorous Dauphinois, might well have been seized by Stendhal and thrown briskly back at its author. We are tempted to wish for Mérimée that he had been infected with some of Stendhal's incorrigible sensibility, that he had been capable of those zigzags from passion to frivolity, from elaborate amorous cunning to the most touching naïveté, from cold realism to childish illusion, which render him the absurdest and most lovable of men to study, and which, it is safe to add, went far to give his novels, for all their *style d'épicier*", the wide appeal that Mérimée's perfection of style and technique have never been able to acquire. But Paris, and perhaps the less full-blooded life of the North, set their brand too early on Mérimée's disposition; and that ever-wakeful spirit of criticism which gave him no surcease completed their work. "The world is too stupid to understand me", Stendhal would burst out; but its incomprehension was no bar to his thoughtless, emotional delight in the unevenness of life, nor did it prevent *La Chartreuse*

*de Parme* from being warm with humanity and the very passions, romantic and yet burning with action, that he declared no one would understand until 1880. The first blast of ridicule, real or imaginary, congealed the stream of Mérimée's spontaneity; and ever afterwards, the water might run dark and swiftly below, but the surface must remain of an irrevocable hardness.

And yet, happy only within hearing of their rustling dresses, attentive to their fashions and talk and most insignificant caprices, allowing himself too easily to dissect their hearts because he was powerfully drawn towards them, tormented that their overwhelming charm blurred the fineness of his examination with responsive vibrations and tremors, yielding finally, with the desperate abandon of one who shrinks from an unreasonable suffering, and yet must acknowledge himself to be Man, a thing of mind and body, two associates at daggers drawn, Mérimée dedicated to women the flower of his existence, and paid them the immense compliment of believing in them alone. He went further. "Towards 1852", he wrote, to Mme de la Rochejacquelein, "I lost my great interest in this life; I have no longer anyone to work for. . . . I used to pursue some aim (not Glory, I can assure you of that). To-day (1855), if I were to write, it would be for myself or the public", and even if we had not the work of his later years to enlighten us on this score, we could have guessed that either of the two audiences would strike him as of equally small significance, and that his writing would show it. And he multiplies the assurances, vowing that *La Double Méprise*, perhaps the finest of his novels, was written for money, "to

give to someone who wasn't worth much" (the *diamond*, we may presume). Not content with reading *Arsène Guillot* to a feminine tribunal at the house of Madame de Boigne, and puzzling the bevy of young girls at Fontainebleau with the riddle of *Lokis*, he would have us believe that of his *contes à dormir debout*, as he called them in a half tender retrospect, not a line fell to the paper that was not an unassuming and yet passionate act of worship paid to an idol enthroned in the secret place of his heart. Retrospect is an uncertain glass; and when we remember not only that Mérimée was perhaps the victim of a mood or of the deceptive reliefs and effacements of memory, but that he never quite cured himself of that tricksy impulse to put his readers off the scent, we are inclined to mistrust the avowal. But the letters to Mme de la Rochejacquelein contain much that is marked by an unquestionable sincerity; and besides, should we not leap delightedly at so plausible a declaration, when we have seen that his withering scepticism might well have nipped those early blooms, and left us only the dull evergreens of his maturity?

For if his novels have lived—and they are far from having succumbed to the permanent blight of forgetfulness—it is probable that they thrive still on the pristine fertility infused into them, and that it is shortsighted to condemn them for having been offered as nosegays to those who alone had, consciously or not, fostered their brilliant growth. No literary creed, we have seen, nourished them with the heat of faith. Whether Mérimée is to be labelled romantic or realist, the qualities in his work which

justify the labels cannot be ascribed to a belief in either of the two doctrines; for with him, both are but the expression of that irritable protest against the tameness of a bourgeois and sentimental age which finds constant voice in his letters. He escapes from the real only to construct a reality no less harsh, but more decorative and more stimulating than that which surrounded him. When he evokes Spain and Corsica, it is not to intoxicate himself with sumptuous imagery, nor to describe in the minute fashion of Gautier, but to set up in a landscape, almost like an engraving for austerity of outline, figures whose actions and impulses belong to real life, but which possess the supreme merits of force, sincerity and naturalness lacked by the world that hems him in. When he touches the French society of his time, it is not to draw its picture and to moralize on its composition, but to insinuate by the most fragmentary happenings that the men are brutes, the women straws on the torrent of fate; if the fancy takes him to describe the war of his day, his realism resolves itself into a contemptuous sketch, a masterpiece, but of concision. Imagination and poetry never perched long on his shoulder; with a flip of his finger, he would drive them off and laughingly parody their flight. The nearest he ever approached to poetry, *La Guzla*, is but a clever pastiche; *La Chronique de Charles IX* he himself stigmatized as a *genre bâtard*, with a shower of impertinences for Scott, who had the bad taste to initiate it; *Le Théâtre de Clara Gazul*, his only other work where true imagination and not mere invention came into play, falls again under the head of the literary impostures.

For discontent and a lack of convictions, save of that which considers life as an evil to be stomached, preside over all he created; and except when he defined art as *exagération à propos*, a too cursory phrase in which the last two words palliate the first and where we perceive his sleepless critical sense, he never deigned to drop any hint of a literary ideal, such as reveal to us why Balzac lived on coffee and sat in a bare room wearing a monk's robe, why Flaubert endured with a tenacious spirit his secret afflictions and the animadversions of his family, how Baudelaire could face the Law Courts without shrinking, and Hugo the uproar of the Théâtre Français. It was as if, outwardly at least, he was discouraged by the *horrible emphase* of the Romantic years to such a point that, blind to the new and mighty spirit of which it was a superficial manifestation, like foam on the stream's surface, he became unable to tolerate anything but the approvals or strictures of those few friends he admitted to his intimacy, or the well-bred sighs and laughter of those feminine audiences who, in the intervals of being nervous of "that awful M. Mérimée", were the fittest judges of stories written under feminine auspices about women and for women. . . . Sainte-Beuve after quoting and giving his full assent to the phrase of the historian Vinet on Mérimée's gifts—*un talent exquis et dur*,—wrote stealthily in his note-books; "*Mérimée est trop homme du monde pour être entièrement artiste.*" Society did indeed take from him much that art might have fructified; but with that invisible worm of pessimism fretting his most private thoughts, what other environment was possible, (once the follies of youth put by) than that world whose age-

long symbol is the Mask?[1] But that caustic and refined essayist, Remy de Gourmont, expanding the too narrow classification of Mérimée as a man tinged with snobbery and playing at literature, the perfect *amateur*, falls right on the truth: "*Son talent s'évanouit à cinquante ans, avec son dernier amour*", and he adds, as if to drive it home, "*Ayant renoncé à l'amour des femmes, il s'attacha à leur amitié.*" Thus, once and for all, we are confronted with the writer under his real colours; a man accidentally and without enthusiasm an artist, never plagued by that eternal goad to absorb life and transform it by divine alchemy into art, but allowing his nature to lead him to the only spring that inspires him both to live and to create, and since creation is with him but an accident, subordinating it to life, and letting it expire when the water, having lost its pristine virtue, serves only to nourish the gnarled tree of existence.

For other *amateurs*, for the jaded palates of students of literature, how happy was the accident! That "exquisite hardness" of which Sainte-Beuve wrote —in vain did he complain of it, that it could not give birth to great art, nor to real naturalness. "Real naturalness", he asserts, "is far more spacious and free than this." But those who have wrestled with matter, and have some experience of the difficulty with which Mérimée's carven perfection of style is attained,—did he not copy out *Colomba* sixteen times over?—are all too ready to overlook the hardness,

[1] M. Edmond Jaloux, writing on Proust in the *Nouvelles Littéraires*, has generalized this trait; "*Un écrivain connu sort beaucoup, fréquente beaucoup de monde, parle indéfiniment. Que de temps perdu, que de forces dispersées, quelle absence de réflexion, de concentration!*" And he goes on to point out how, for this reason, many French novelists do not advance beyond the conception of the *nouvelle*.

rather to appreciate it for the marvellous literary edge that it enabled him to put on those cameos, and to take a keen delight in what the critic himself acknowledges to be a very individual gift—the French is more direct—*un truc qui n'est qu'à lui.* To watch him, without apparent effort, set up in a few lines the essential contours of a landscape or an environment; situate his few, fastidiously chosen characters, outline them in the clear air; in a minimum of time, draw them irrevocably towards each other in the vortex of a tragedy for which, you feel, they were born; bring down the blow, hawk-swift, and then, while you are still quivering with the terror or the indignation he has roused in you, be away, impassive, disowning, scornful, on the leisurely track of some social or archaeological oddity that has caught his eye, as if violent action were in the most deplorable taste, cruelty and blood at best a diversion—the sensation is one that no reader of Mérimée's novels can forget. One would say, almost, that his moral "interdictions", as Sainte-Beuve calls them, his self-imposed limitations, once transposed into the world of art, become the most precious of literary virtues; measure and hatred of the commonplace and an unswerving cult of reality, which does indeed make his characters stand "painfully distinct in outline, inevitable to sight, unrelieved . . . like solitary mountain forms on some hard, perfectly transparent day".[1] And neither before nor since is anything to be found which bears more than a superficial resemblance to the best of his tales[2]. It

[1] W. Pater, *Taylorian Lectures*. Clarendon Press, 1900.

[2] With the possible exception of stories of Gobineau, and those of Pushkin mentioned above.

serves no purpose to call up the Spanish *novelas* of the seventeenth century, which he knew well, and must have delighted in for their realism and bloodthirstiness, nor, after reading *Le Vase Etrusque*, to detect in the *Zayde* of Mme de Lafayette a similar intrigue, a jealousy bringing a like tragedy, nor to compare him to the spontaneous Diderot, for Mérimée's digressions are purely artistic and not the outlet for an irresistible flow of knowledge and encyclopaedic observations, while Diderot's candid atheism has none of that bitterness it bred in Mérimée, and never for a second checks any impulse of expression or gives a twist to his breezy talent. Mérimée and Stendhal, too, without doubt, would not have disowned as literary ancestor the first French novelist to attach importance to *la verrue*, the minute trait which reveals a world of significant facts, the detailed study of physical and mental twitches, of personal eccentricities. But it is that pure phrase, that whittling down of sense and form until only the essential verity is left shivering, as it were, in the crude light, that seemingly effortless grace, that wit hiding a kernel of sadness which brings out the full and complicated flavour, that loading of each sentence with just its proper freight of significance so that not one heels over or moves too rapidly for those that precede and follow it, and to crown all, that terrible nonchalance; this, no tale-teller has yet been able to catch, and the uniqueness of the quality and the consequent pleasure are not likely to be destroyed.

And yet, Fame cares for none of these things. The faultless art of Mérimée has nothing of the lifeless beauty that is the sole charm remaining in the works,

say, of a Gautier or a Wilde or a Maeterlinck; for the greater part of it treats of the most burning realities, life blown to its whitest flame, and one, not of purity, but of passion. But it is easy to understand that he can be called "an author of an exquisite decadence",[1] and that a certain "corruption" is necessary to a mind that truly appreciates him. For, save when the profound sadness and illogicality of human life has slid almost against his will into the pages of his joyless novels, we can but think of them as sensations; and the greatest work is never sensation alone, but experience, penetrating and enriching the life of the reader. Poetry, it may be pleaded, depends also for its effect on sensation, and no one demands of it that its loveliness, devoid of all utility as that of the finest lyric poetry must be, should contribute one atom to the tale of humanity's pleasures and griefs. But poets, those dispossessed angels on earth, are a law unto themselves; and even so, verse that is built up with images alone cannot stand by the side of that which gleams suffused and transfigured, they alone know how, with emotion. Fame, that is, the suffrage of future generations, whatever it is worth, cannot be expected to share the dilettante's ecstasies over a shot or a dagger-thrust no less impeccably delivered than told of, a headlong action performed and recounted for its own vivid sake. That something more, that indefinable spark, which is the lyricism of poetry, and which a novelist, in his less ethereal atmosphere, can only secure, it would seem, by the gift of sympathy, is the diamond shield against the scythe of mortality, the one passport into greatness.

[1] d'Haussonville.

It is not the harsh beauty of *Carmen*, nor even that of *Colomba*, psychologically more solid, which are best equipped to stand against the sweeping blade, but those less brilliant and profounder commentaries on the strangeness of men's instincts and fortunes, like *Le Vase Etrusque*, and even more, that little known masterpiece, *La Double Méprise*; for there Mérimée was betrayed out of his feigned sternness and indifference into a pitifulness the more poignant for its revelation by the mere choice of events that precipitate Julie de Chaverny and Saint-Clair into disaster; a show of sentimentality would have been far less fruitful in pathos.

And, if reinforcement is needed, there remains the correspondence—not the rippling intelligence of the letters to Panizzi, which constitute the ideal panorama of French politics during the Second Empire, nor the homage to Priapus and Bacchus represented by the early letters to Stendhal, but the gentle intimacy of those written from Cannes to Mme de Beaulaincourt, the gossipy notes to Mrs Senior, where his studious homelife is so humorously sketched, the grave reflections on life and death confided to the lady of the medal, and most of all, the rainbow letters to the Inconnue. For, although not a line of a single screed he wrote to his privileged acquaintances was ever empty of that lambent, elusive charm which is composed of wit and culture and gallantry and that unseizable thing, style, yet the letters written to his women friends are those which prevent us from seeing him as he often saw his own creations, cut in the rock-crystal of intelligence, a bas-relief of cold perfection; they

reveal him warm and breathing, and uniting to a hundred gifts that secret and burdensome and all-illumining treasure, a soul.

Not that we have pinned him down, tropical butterfly, with wings spread out in magnificence, radiating round his simple form. That treasure's very possession entitles him to keep something of the intangibility that is the prerogative of an aristocratic mind; without it, his haughty brilliance would have been easy to analyse, to break up scientifically into its component hues. At least, we retain an image—of a Klingsor's garden, it seems, magically let down into a wild country seared with ravines, traversed by whirlwinds, while the repercussions of errant thunders tremble on the distant sulphurous horizon and inexplicable gales bend the trees to the ground. In the garden itself, where the symmetrical terraces and exactly proportioned stairways lead up to a discreet mansion, fit residence for an eighteenth century gentleman, an almost disquieting order reigns; the statues are posed with elegance, no projecting twig dishevels the yew-trees, the ponds are smooth quadrilaterals; were it not for the scattered orange and fire-red and purple of the flower-beds, themselves reduced to discipline under a sky of miraculous purity, or a fortuitous arm of stone raised eloquently in a gesture of classic rage or appeal, you would take this dead correctness for the caprice of a Voltaire turned wizard, or the chosen haunt of his spectre. But day and night, and most strangely of all when the melancholy blue of evening overshrouds this formal retreat, a murmur, small and uneven and

persistent, troubles the garden; and it is only after diligent search that the seeker will trace it to the remotest corner of the stone grounds. There, as if by a bizarre impotence of the sorcerer, a plot has survived where a shock of unkempt weeds and wild-flowers has luxuriantly swarmed over a marble basin; and there rises from it a slender opaline spray of water, sole author of the garden's uneasiness, for with the pulse of its rise and down-splashing it composes a vague music, between words and melody, the broken sing-song of a confession. And long after the blackness of night has cast doubt on the reality of the vision and blurred the begonias and the roses to a lunar incertitude, the bubbling complaint does not cease, becoming a litany of sobs, with here and there a low, penitent laugh, Emotion fondly pursuing its own echo through the dark airs of Time.

THE END

# APPENDICES

# Appendix I

The well-known dictation concocted by Mérimée for the torment of the illustrious guests at Compiègne runs as follows:—

*Pour parler sans ambiguïté, ce dîner à Sainte-Adresse, près du Havre, malgré les effluves embaumés de la mer, malgré les vins de très bons crus, les cuisseaux de veau et les cuissots de chevreuil prodigués par l'amphitryon, fut un vrai guêpier.*

*Quelles que soient et quelque exiguës que t'aient paru, à côté de la somme due, les arrhes qu'étaient censés avoir données à maint et maint fusilier subtil la douairière ainsi que le marguillier, bien que lui ou elle soit censée les avoir refusées et s'en soit repentie, va-t'en les réclamer pour telle ou telle bru jolie par qui tu les diras redemandées, quoiqu'il ne siée pas de dire qu'elle se les est laissé arracher par l'adresse desdits fusiliers et qu'on les leur aurait suppléées dans toute autre circonstance ou pour les motifs de toutes sortes.*

*Il était infâme d'en vouloir pour cela à ces fusiliers jumeaux et mal bâtis et de leur infliger une raclée, alors qu'ils ne songeaient qu'à prendre des rafraîchissements avec leurs coreligionnaires.*

*Quoi qu'il en soit, c'est bien à tort que la douairière, par un contre-sens exorbitant, s'est laissé entrainer à prendre un râteau et qu'elle s'est crue obligée de frapper l'exigeant marguillier sur son omoplate vieillie.*

*Deux alvéoles furent brisés; une dyssenterie se déclara suivie de phthisie.*

*" Par Saint-Martin, quelle hémorragie!" s'écria ce bélitre.*

*A cet évenement, saisissant son goupillon, ridicule excédant de bagage, il la poursuivit dans l'église tout entière.*

# Appendix II

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